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SIX ESSAYS ON  
JOHNSON

*By* WALTER RALEIGH

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THE essay on the two-hundredth anniversary of Johnson's birth appeared first in the Literary Supplement of the *Times*; that on *Early Lives of the Poets* in the *Scottish Historical Review*. For permission to reprint these essays I desire to thank the proprietors of the *Times* and Mr. James MacLehose. The Delegates of the Clarendon Press have kindly granted a similar permission for the essays on *Samuel Johnson* and on *Johnson's Shakespeare*. The essays on *Johnson without Boswell* and on *Johnson's Lives of the Poets* are here printed for the first time. I must not omit to express my deep obligations to the editions of Dr. Birkbeck Hill, which make the study of Johnson the easiest of pastimes.



# I

## SAMUEL JOHNSON

The Leslie Stephen Lecture, delivered in the Senate House,  
Cambridge, February 22, 1907.

THE honour that the University of Cambridge has done me by asking me to deliver the first Leslie Stephen lecture is the best kind of honour, for it appeals even more to affection than to pride. Like most men whose trade is lecturing, I have known many Universities; but none of them can be so dear to memory as the place of my early friendships, and dreams, and idleness.

A quarter of a century ago I heard Leslie Stephen lecture in the Divinity Schools of this place. I saw him once again, on the uplands of Cornwall, but I never again heard his voice. You will not expect from me, therefore, any reminiscences, or intimate appreciation of his character. But I can say something of what I believe was very imperfectly known to him, the regard and reverence that was felt for him by a younger generation. A busy man of letters, always occupied with fresh tasks, has little time to study the opinions of his juniors. He makes his progress from book to book, without looking back, and knows more of the pains of doing than of the pleasures of the thing done. Far on in his career, while he is still struggling with his difficult material, he discovers, to his surprise, that the younger world regards him as a triumphant dictator and law-giver. Something of this kind I think happened to Leslie

Stephen. He woke up, late in life, to find himself an established institution. He was pleased, and half-incredulous, and he turned to his weary task again. But indeed he had been famous and influential far longer than he knew. The work in literary criticism that was done by him, and by Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, was unlike most of the criticism of the last age. Amid a crowd of treatises which directed attention chiefly to the manner of an author, it was a solid comfort to come across a critic who made it his business to grasp the matter, and who paid even a poet the compliment of supposing that he had something to say. There is no finer literary model than bare matter of fact; and Leslie Stephen's style, 'the lean, terse style' as it has been called, constantly aimed at this perfection. The *Dictionary of National Biography*, under his control, became a gymnasium for authors, a gymnasium where no one was permitted to exercise his muscle until he had stripped himself of those garments which ordinary literary society expects authors to wear. It was Leslie Stephen's aim to prove that this avoidance of superfluity is not the negation of criticism. He was nothing if not critical, but he endeavoured to identify his criticism with the facts, to make it the wall of the building, not a flying buttress. When he relaxed something of his rigour and severity, as he did in his latest studies, his ease was like Dryden's, the ease of an athlete; and the native qualities of his mind, his sincerity and kindliness and depth of feeling, are nowhere more visible than in his latest and best prose. He still keeps close to his subject, but he permits himself an indulgence which formerly he refused, and sometimes, for a few delightful sentences, speaks of himself.



There is no need for haste in estimating his work and his services to good letters. These will not soon be forgotten. I like to think that he would have approved my choice of a subject for the first of the lectures associated with his name. His enjoyment of books, he said at the close of his life, had begun and ended with Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Literature, as it is understood for the purposes of these lectures, is to include, so I am informed, biography, criticism, and ethics. If I had been commanded to choose from the world's annals a name which, better than any other, should serve to illustrate the vital relations of those three subjects to literature, I could find no better name than Samuel Johnson. He was himself biographer, critic, and moralist. His life is inseparable from his works; his morality was the motive power of all that he wrote, and the inspiration of much that he did. Of all great men, dead or alive, he is the best known to us; yet perhaps he was greater than we know.

The accident which gave Boswell to Johnson and Johnson to Boswell is one of the most extraordinary pieces of good fortune in literary history. Boswell was a man of genius; the idle paradox which presents him in the likeness of a lucky dunce was never tenable by serious criticism, and has long since been rejected by all who bring thought to bear on the problems of literature. If I had to find a paradox in Boswell I should find it in this, that he was a Scot. His character was destitute of all the vices, and all the virtues, which are popularly, and in the main rightly, attributed to the Scottish people. The young Scot is commonly shy, reserved, and self-conscious; independent in temper, sensitive to affront, slow to make friends, and wary in society.

Boswell was the opposite of all these things. He made himself at home in all societies, and charmed others into a like ease and confidence. Under the spell of his effervescent good-humour the melancholy Highlanders were willing to tell stories of the supernatural. 'Mr. Boswell's frankness and gayety,' says Johnson, 'made everybody communicative.' It was no small part of Boswell's secret that he talked with engaging freedom, and often, as it seemed, with childish vanity, of himself. He had the art of interesting others without incurring their respect. He had no ulterior motives. He desired no power, only information, so that his companions recognized his harmlessness, and despised him, and talked to him without a shadow of restraint. He felt a sincere and unbounded admiration for greatness or originality of intellect. 'I have the happiness,' he wrote to Lord Chatham, 'of being capable to contemplate with supreme delight those distinguished spirits by which God is sometimes pleased to honour humanity.' But indeed he did not confine his interest to the great. He was an amateur of human life; his zest in its smallest incidents and his endless curiosity were infectious and irresistible. No scientific investigator has ever been prompted by a livelier zeal for knowledge; and his veracity was scrupulous and absolute. 'A Scotchman must be a very sturdy moralist,' said Johnson, 'who does not love Scotland better than truth.' Boswell was very far indeed from being a sturdy moralist, but he loved truth better than Scotland, better even than himself. Most of the stories told against him, and almost all the witticisms reported at his expense, were first narrated by himself. He had simplicity, candour, fervour, a warmly affectionate nature, a quick intelligence, and a passion for telling

all that he knew. These are qualities which make for good literature. They enabled Boswell to portray Johnson with an intimacy and truth that has no parallel in any language.

We owe such an enormous debt of gratitude to Boswell that it seems ungrateful to suggest what is nevertheless obviously true, that the Johnson we know best is Boswell's Johnson. The *Life* would be a lesser work than it is if it had not the unity that was imposed upon it by the mind of its writer. The portrait is so broad and masterly, so nobly conceived and so faithful in detail, that the world has been content to look at Johnson from this point of view and no other. Yet it cannot be denied, and Boswell himself would have been the first to admit it, that there are aspects and periods of Johnson's career which are not and could not be fully treated in the *Life*. When Johnson first saw Boswell in Tom Davies's back shop, he was fifty-four years old and Boswell was twenty-two. The year before the meeting Johnson had been rescued, by the grant of an honourable pension, from the prolonged struggle with poverty which makes up so great a part of the story of his life. He had conquered his world; his circumstances were now comparatively easy and his primacy was universally acknowledged. All these facts have left their mark on Boswell's book. We have some trivial and slight memorials of Shakespeare by men who treated him on equal terms of friendship or rivalry. But Johnson, in our conception of him, is always on a pedestal. He is Doctor Johnson; although he was sixty-six years of age when his own University gave him its honorary degree. The fact is that we cannot escape from Boswell any more than his hero could; and we do not

wish to escape, and we do not try. There are many admirers and friends of Johnson who are familiar with every notable utterance recorded by Boswell, who yet would be hard put to it if they were asked to quote a single sentence from *The Rambler*. That splendid repository of wisdom and truth has ceased to attract readers: it has failed and has been forgotten in the unequal contest with Boswell. 'It is not sufficiently considered,' said Johnson, in an early number of *The Rambler*, 'that men more frequently require to be reminded than informed.' I desire to remind you of the work of Johnson, the writer of prose; and I am happy in my subject, for the unique popularity of Boswell has given to the study of Johnson's own works a certain flavour of novelty and research.

It will be wise to face at once the charge so often brought against these writings, that they are dull. M. Taine, who somehow got hold of the mistaken idea that Johnson's periodical essays are the favourite reading of the English people, has lent his support to this charge. Wishing to know what ideas had made Johnson popular, he turned over the pages of his *Dictionary*, his eight volumes of essays, his biographies, his numberless articles, his conversation so carefully collected, and he yawned. 'His truths,' says this critic, 'are too true, we already know his precepts by heart. We learn from him that life is short, and we ought to improve the few moments granted us; that a mother ought not to bring up her son as a fop; that a man ought to repent of his faults and yet avoid superstition; that in everything we ought to be active and not hurried. We thank him for these sage counsels, but we mutter to ourselves that we could have done very well without them.' I will not



continue the quotation. It is clear that M. Taine's study of Johnson was limited to a table of contents. What he says amounts to this—that Johnson's writings are a treasury of commonplaces; and in this opinion he certainly has the concurrence of a good many of Johnson's fellow countrymen, who have either refused to read the works or have failed after a gallant attempt.

A commonplace, I take it, is an oft-repeated truth which means nothing to the hearer of it. But for the most perfect kind of commonplace we must enlarge this definition by adding that it means nothing also to the speaker of it. Now it cannot be denied that Johnson's essays are full of commonplace in the first and narrower sense. When he came before the public as a periodical writer, he presented the world with the odd spectacle of a journalist who cared passionately for truth and nothing at all for novelty. The circulation of *The Rambler* was about five hundred copies, and the only number of it which had a great sale was a paper by Richardson, teaching unmarried ladies the advantages of a domestic reputation and a devout bearing at church as effective lures for husbands. Johnson's papers often handle well-worn moral themes in general and dogmatic language, without any effort to commend them to the reader by particular experiences. He did not conceal from himself the difficulty of making any impression on the wider public—'a multitude fluctuating in pleasures or immersed in business, without time for intellectual amusements.' In many passages of his works he shows a keen appreciation of the obstacles to be surmounted before an author can capture the attention and wield the sympathies of his readers. The chief of these obstacles is the deep and sincere interest which every author feels in

his own work and which he imagines will be communicated automatically to the reader. 'We are seldom tiresome to ourselves.' Every book that can be called a book has had one interested and excited reader. It is surely a strange testimony to the imperfection of human sympathy and the isolation of the single mind that some books have had only one.

An author's favourite method of attack in the attempt to cross the barrier that separates him from his reader is the method of surprise. The writer who can startle his public by an immediate appeal to the livelier passions and sentiments is sure of a hearing, and can thereafter gain attention even for the commonplace. This method was never practised by Johnson. He despised it, for he knew that what he had to say was no commonplace, so far as he himself was concerned. Among all his discourses on human life he utters hardly a single precept which had not been brought home to him by living experience. The pages of *The Rambler*, if we can read them, are aglow with the earnestness of dear-bought conviction, and rich in conclusions gathered not from books but from life and suffering. It is here that the biography of the writer helps us. If he will not come to meet us, we can go to meet him. Any reader who acquaints himself intimately with the records of Johnson's life, and then reads *The Rambler*, must be very insensible if he does not find it one of the most moving of books. It was so to Boswell, who says that he could never read the following sentence without feeling his frame thrill: 'I think there is some reason for questioning whether the body and mind are not so proportioned that the one can bear all which can be inflicted on the other; whether virtue cannot stand its ground as long as life, and whether

a soul well principled will not be separated sooner than subdued.'

Almost every number of *The Rambler* contains reflections and thoughts which cease to be commonplace when the experiences that suggested them are remembered. For more than thirty years of his mature life Johnson was poor, often miserably poor. There are three degrees of poverty, he said—want of riches, want of competence, and want of necessities. He had known them all. He spoke little of this in his later years; there is no pleasure, he said, in narrating the annals of beggary. But his knowledge of poverty has expressed itself more than once in the quiet commonplaces of *The Rambler*. Again, he was tortured by what he called indolence, but what was more probably natural fatigue consequent upon the excessive nervous expenditure of his bouts of hard work. And this too finds expression in *The Rambler*. 'Indolence,' he says, 'is one of the vices from which those whom it infects are seldom reformed. Every other species of luxury operates upon some appetite that is quickly satiated, and requires some concurrence of art or accident which every place will not supply; but the desire of ease acts equally at all hours, and the longer it is indulged is the more increased. To do nothing is in every man's power; we can never want an opportunity of omitting duties.' The topics of *The Rambler* are many, but the great majority of them are drawn from the graver aspects of life, and it is when he treats of fundamental duties and inevitable sorrows, bereavement, and disease, and death, that Johnson rises to his full stature. When he ventures to emulate the tea-table morality of the *Spectator* he has not a light or happy touch. Yet his knowledge of the human mind

is not only much more profound than Addison's, it is also more curious and subtle. In an essay on bashfulness he first investigates its causes, and finds the chief of them in too high an opinion of our own importance. Then he applies the remedy :

‘The most useful medicines are often unpleasing to the taste. Those who are oppressed by their own reputation will, perhaps, not be comforted by hearing that their cares are unnecessary. But the truth is that no man is much regarded by the rest of the world. He that considers how little he dwells upon the condition of others, will learn how little the attention of others is attracted by himself. While we see multitudes passing before us, of whom, perhaps, not one appears to deserve our notice, or excite our sympathy, we should remember that we likewise are lost in the same throng ; that the eye which happens to glance upon us is turned in a moment on him that follows us, and that the utmost which we can reasonably hope or fear is, to fill a vacant hour with prattle, and be forgotten.’

This is prose that will not suffer much by comparison with the best in the language. It is strange to remember, as we read some of the noblest of Johnson's sentences, that they were written in a periodical paper for the entertainment of chance readers. His essay on Revenge concludes with an appeal not often to be found in the pages of a society journal: ‘Of him that hopes to be forgiven, it is indispensably required that he forgive. It is therefore superfluous to urge any other motive. On this great duty eternity is suspended ; and to him that refuses to practise it, the throne of mercy is inaccessible, and the Saviour of the world has been born in vain.’



The passages that I have quoted from *The Rambler* are perhaps enough to illustrate what Johnson means when he speaks, in the last number, of his services to the English language. 'Something, perhaps, I have added to the elegance of its construction, and something to the harmony of its cadence.' Later criticism has been inclined to say rather that he subdued the syntax of his native tongue to a dull mechanism, and taught it a drowsy tune. But this is unjust. It is true that he loved balance and order, and that the elaborate rhetorical structure of his sentences is very ill-adapted to describe the trivial matters to which he sometimes applies it, such as the arrival of a lady at a country house. 'When a tiresome and vexatious journey of four days had brought me to the house, where invitation, regularly sent for seven years together, had at last induced me to pass the summer, I was surprised, after the civilities of my first reception, to find, instead of the leisure and tranquillity which a rural life always promises, and, if well conducted, might always afford, a confused wildness of care, and a tumultuous hurry of diligence, by which every face was clouded and every motion agitated.' In a sentence like this, the ear, which has been trained to love completeness and symmetry, shows itself exorbitant in its demands, and compels even the accidents of domestic life to happen in contrasted pairs. The idle antithetical members of the sentence have been compared to those false knobs and handles which are used, for the sake of symmetry, in a debased style of furniture. But this occasional fault of the formal Johnsonian syntax is of a piece with its merits. The sentence is very complex, and when no member of it is idle, when every antithesis makes room for some new consideration, it can be packed full of

meaning, so that it exhibits a subject in all its bearings, and in a few lines does the work of a chapter. When Johnson is verbose and languid, it is often because his subject is slight, and does not yield him matter enough to fill his capacious style. The syntax is still a stately organ, fitted to discourse great music, but the bellows are poor and weak. When his mind gets to work on a subject that calls forth all his powers, his vigour and versatility, displayed within a narrow compass, are amazing. There is nothing new to add to his brief conclusion in the question of the second sight, which he investigated with some care during his Highland journey. 'To collect sufficient testimonies,' he says, 'for the satisfaction of the public, or of ourselves, would have required more time than we could bestow. There is, against it, the seeming analogy of things confusedly seen and little understood; and, for it, the indistinct cry of national persuasion, which may be perhaps resolved at last into prejudice and tradition. I never could advance my curiosity to conviction; but came away at last only willing to believe.'

In *The Lives of the Poets* his style reaches its maturity of vigour and ease. The author of these *Lives* is Boswell's Johnson, the brilliant talker, the king of literary society,

Who ruled, as he thought fit,  
The universal monarchy of wit.

Yet for the light that they throw on Johnson's own character I doubt whether any of the *Lives* can compare with *The Life of Richard Savage*, which was published almost twenty years before the meeting with Boswell. The character of Savage was marked, as Boswell truly observes, by profligacy, insolence, and ingratitude. But

Johnson had wandered the streets with him for whole nights together, when they could not pay for a lodging, and had taken delight in his rich and curious stores of information concerning high and low society. The *Life of Savage* is a tribute of extraordinary delicacy and beauty, paid by Johnson to his friend. Only a man of the broadest and sanest sympathies could have performed this task, which Johnson does not seem to find difficult. Towards Savage he is all tenderness and generosity, yet he does not for an instant relax his allegiance to the virtues which formed no part of his friend's character. He tells the whole truth; yet his affection for Savage remains what he felt it to be, the most important truth of all. His morality is so entirely free from pedantry, his sense of the difficulty of virtue and the tragic force of circumstance is so keen, and his love of singularity of character is so great, that even while he points the moral of a wasted life he never comes near to the vanity of condemnation. It is abundantly clear from the facts, which he records with all the impartiality of a naturalist, that Savage, besides being hopelessly self-indulgent and dissolute, was violently egotistic, overbearing, and treacherous to his friends. Johnson's verdict on these faults is given in the closing sentences of the *Life*: 'The insolence and resentment of which he is accused were not easily to be avoided by a great mind, irritated by perpetual hardships, and constrained hourly to return the spurns of contempt and repress the insolence of prosperity; and vanity surely may be readily pardoned in him, to whom life afforded no other comforts than barren praises and the consciousness of deserving them. Those are no proper judges of his conduct, who have slumbered

away their time on the down of plenty; nor will any wise man easily presume to say, "Had I been in Savage's condition, I should have lived or written better than Savage."'

If we try to picture Johnson in his most characteristic attitude we usually see him sitting on that throne of human felicity, a chair in a tavern, and roaring down opposition. It was thus that Boswell knew him best, and though the same record exhibits him in many other aspects, yet the predominant impression persists. So Johnson has come to be regarded as a kind of Chairman to humanity, whose business it is to cry 'Order, Order,' an embodiment of corporate tradition and the settled wisdom of the ages.

Yet we may think of him, if we like, in a less public fashion, as a man full of impulse and whim, quaint in humour, passionate in feeling, warm in imagination, and, above all, original. You can never predict what Johnson will say when his opinion is challenged. Doubtless he loved paradox and argument, but he was no dialectician, and behind the play of talk his fancies and tastes were intensely individual. He disliked all talk that dealt with historical facts, especially the facts of Roman history. He never, while he lived, desired to hear of the Punic War. Others besides Johnson have been distressed and fatigued by talk that is merely an exercise of memory. But his method of escape was all his own. When Mrs. Thrale asked his opinion of the conversational powers of Charles James Fox, 'He talked to me at club one day,' said Johnson, 'concerning Catiline's conspiracy—so I withdrew my attention, and thought about Tom Thumb.'

Johnson is famous for his good sense and sound



judgement, but his good sense abounds in surprises. There is a delightful touch of surprise in his comparison of a ship to a jail. 'No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail; for being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned.' And again, 'A man in jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company.' The same dislike of the sea expresses itself in a paper of *The Rambler* which discusses the possibility of varying the monotony of pastoral poetry by introducing marine subjects. But unfortunately the sea has less variety than the land. 'To all the inland inhabitants of every region, the sea is only known as an immense diffusion of waters, over which men pass from one country to another, and in which life is frequently lost.'

Wherever you open the pages of Johnson's works you will find general truths sincerely and vigorously expressed, but behind the brave array of dogma you will find everywhere the strongest marks of an individual mind, and the charm and colour of personal predilections. The Romantic writers must not be allowed the credit of inventing the personal note in literature. What they invented was not themselves, but a certain sentimental way of regarding themselves. Johnson despised all such sentiment. 'When a butcher tells you,' he said, 'that his heart bleeds for his country, he has in fact no uneasy feeling.' Rousseau is not more individual in his cultivation of sentiment than Johnson in his dislike of it. He carried this dislike to strange extremes, so that all gesticulation and expression of the emotions became suspect to him. Of the preaching of Dr. Isaac Watts he says, 'He did not endeavour to assist his eloquence by any gesticulations; for, as no

corporeal actions have any correspondence with theological truth, he did not see how they could enforce it.' Perhaps the best example of this fixed distaste for demonstrative emotion may be found in his contempt for the actor's profession. It is dangerous to quarrel with Boswell, but it seems to me impossible to accept his suggestion that Johnson's opinions concerning stage-players had their origin in jealousy of the success of Garrick. Such jealousy is utterly unlike all that we know of Johnson. On the other hand, a hatred of show and a fierce resentment at the response of his own feelings to cunningly simulated passion are exactly what we should expect in him. The passages in which he has expressed himself on this matter are too many and too various to be attributed to a gust of personal ill-feeling. One of the most delightful of them occurs in his notes on the character of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 'Bottom,' he says, 'seems to have been bred in a tiring-room. He is for engrossing every part, and would exclude his inferiors from all possibility of distinction.' Again, 'Bottom discovers a true genius for the stage by his solicitude for propriety of dress, and his deliberation which beard to choose among many beards, all unnatural.'

The sonorous and ponderous rotundity of Johnson's style, and the unflinching respect that he pays to law and decorum, have partly concealed from view the wilfulness of his native temper. Obedience to law imposed from without can never be the soul of a man or of a writer. It is the converted rebels who give power to the arm of government. If there has ever been a writer of a sober, slow and conforming temper, who has left memorable work behind him, it will be found, I think, that for the

greater part of his life he acted as a poor mechanical drudge in the service of his own youthful enthusiasm, and painfully filled out the schemes which were conceived in a happier time. All enduring literary work is the offspring of intense excitement. Johnson did most of his reading piecemeal, in a fever of agitation. If any man praised a book in his presence, he was sure to ask, 'Did you read it through?' If the answer was in the affirmative, he did not seem willing to believe it. He very seldom read a book from beginning to end; his writing, moreover, was done at high speed, and often at a great heat of imagination. Some writers use general statements as a mask to conceal ignorance and emptiness: Johnson prefers them because they lend smoothness and decency to passion. He states only his conclusions; but the premises, although they are not given, are vividly present to his mind. When it becomes necessary, as a guarantee of sincerity and knowledge, to exhibit in full all that is implied in a general statement, he reverses his favourite method, and permits his imagination to expatiate on his material with all the visionary activity of poetry. His review of Soame Jenyns's *Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* furnishes a splendid instance of this imaginative power, which expands an abstract proposition into all its detailed consequences. Soame Jenyns was a gentleman with a taste for metaphysic, who had offered some conjectures, in the glib optimistic vein of Pope, towards the explanation of failure and suffering. In the course of his essays he touches, with a light hand, on the possible compensations and advantages of pain and poverty. In order to demonstrate that all partial evil is universal good he constructs an airy hierarchy, or graduated scale of

imaginary beings, each rank of whom he supposes to derive benefit from the pains of those who inhabit a lower grade. Johnson's piety and humility, his profound sense of the reality of human suffering and the weakness of human faculty, were outraged by this fantastic philosophy. 'To these speculations,' he says, 'humanity is unequal.' In a passage of relentless satire Soame Jenyns is introduced, for the first time, to the meaning of his own hypothesis. 'He imagines,' says Johnson, 'that as we have not only animals for food, but choose some for our own diversion, the same privilege may be allowed to some beings above us, *who may deceive, torment, or destroy us for the ends only of their own pleasure and utility.* This he again finds impossible to be conceived, *but that impossibility lessens not the probability of the conjecture, which by analogy is so strongly confirmed.*

'I cannot resist the temptation of contemplating this analogy, which, I think, he might have carried further, very much to the advantage of his argument. He might have shown that *these hunters, whose game is man,* have many sports analogous to our own. As we drown whelps and kittens, they amuse themselves now and then with sinking a ship, and stand round the fields of Blenheim or the walls of Prague, as we encircle a cock-pit. As we shoot a bird flying, they take a man in the midst of his business or pleasure, and knock him down with an apoplexy. Some of them, perhaps, are virtuosi, and delight in the operations of an asthma, as a human philosopher in the effects of an air-pump. To swell a man with a tympany is as good sport as to blow a frog. Many a merry bout have these frolic beings at the vicissitudes of an ague, and good sport it



is to see a man tumble with epilepsy, and revive and tumble again, and all this he knows not why. As they are wiser and more powerful than we, they have more exquisite diversions, for we have no way of procuring any sport so brisk and so lasting as the paroxysms of the gout and the stone, which undoubtedly must make high mirth, especially if the play be a little diversified with the blunders and puzzles of the blind and deaf. We know not how far their sphere of observation may extend. Perhaps now and then a merry being may place himself in such a situation as to enjoy at once all the varieties of an epidemical disease, or amuse his leisure with the tossings and contortions of every possible pain exhibited together.

‘One sport the merry malice of these beings has found means of enjoying to which we have nothing equal or similar. They now and then catch a mortal proud of his parts, and flattered either by the submission of those who court his kindness or the notice of those who suffer him to court theirs. A head thus prepared for the reception of false opinions and the projection of vain designs they easily fill with idle notions, till in time they make their plaything an author: their first diversion commonly begins with an ode or an epistle, then rises perhaps to a political irony, and is at last brought to its height by a treatise of philosophy. Then begins the poor animal to entangle himself in sophisms and flounder in absurdity, to talk confidently of the scale of being, and to give solutions which himself confesses impossible to be understood. Sometimes, however, it happens that their pleasure is without much mischief. The author feels no pain, but while they are wondering at the extravagance of his opinion, and

pointing him out to one another as a new example of human folly, he is enjoying his own applause and that of his companions, and perhaps is elevated with the hope of standing at the head of a new sect.

‘Many of the books which now crowd the world may be justly suspected to be written for the sake of some invisible order of beings—for surely they are of no use to any of the corporeal inhabitants of the world. . . . The only reason why we should contemplate Evil is, that we may bear it better; and I am afraid nothing is much more placidly endured for the sake of making others sport.’

Johnson, it may be remarked, does not answer Soame Jenyns’s argument; he concentrates on it the heat of his imagination, and it shrivels under the glow. He felt no respect for a structure of theory, however ingenious and elaborate, which is built up from facts imperfectly realized. ‘Life,’ he says, ‘must be seen before it can be known.’ Because he had seen much of life, his last and greatest work, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets*, is more than a collection of facts: it is a book of wisdom and experience, a treatise on the conduct of life, a commentary on human destiny.

Those *Lives* will never lose their authoritative value as a record. The biographer must often consult them for their facts. The student of Johnson will consult them quite as often for the light that they throw on their author, who moves among the English poets easily and freely, enjoying the society of his peers, praising them without timidity, judging them without superstition, yet ready at all times with those human allowances which are more likely to be kept in mind by a man’s intimates than by an indifferent posterity.

When Johnson undertook the *Lives* he was almost seventy years of age ; he had long been familiar with his subject, and he wrote from a full mind, rapidly and confidently. He spent little time on research. When Boswell tried to introduce him to Lord Marchmont, who had a store of anecdotes concerning Pope, he at first refused the trouble of hearing them. 'I suppose, Sir,' said Mrs. Thrale, with something of the severity of a governess, 'Mr. Boswell thought, that as you are to write Pope's *Life*, you would wish to know about him.' Johnson accepted the reproof, though he might very well have replied that he knew more than was necessary for his purpose. An even better instance of his indifference may be found in his criticism of Congreve. Congreve's dramatic works are not bulky, and were doubtless to be found in any well-appointed drawing-room. But Johnson would not rise from his desk. 'Of Congreve's plays,' he says, 'I cannot speak distinctly ; for since I inspected them many years have passed ; but what remains upon my memory is, that his characters are commonly fictitious and artificial, with very little of nature and not much of life.' Then follows an admirable critical summary of Congreve's peculiar merits in comedy.

This magnanimous carelessness with regard to detail helped rather than hindered the breadth and justice of Johnson's scheme. There are many modern biographies and histories, full of carefully authenticated fact, which afflict the reader with a weight of indigestion. The author has no right to his facts, no ownership in them. They have flitted through his mind on a calm five minutes' passage from the notebook to the immortality of the printed page. But no man can hope to make much

impression on a reader with facts which he has not thought it worth his own while to remember. Every considerable book, in literature or science, is an engine whereby mind operates on mind. It is an ignorant worship of Science which treats it as residing in books, and reduces the mind to a mechanism of transfer. The measure of an author's power would be best found in the book which he should sit down to write the day after his library was burnt to the ground.

The *Lives of the Poets* has not a few of the qualities of such a book. It is broadly conceived and written, it has a firm grasp of essentials, the portraits are lifelike, and the judgements, on the whole, wonderfully fair. There has been much extravagant talk among Romantic critics of Johnson's prejudices, and even of his incapacity as a judge of poetry. Time will avenge him on these critics; and Time has begun to do its work. The minor poets of our own day may well be glad that Johnson is not alive among them.

His occasional errors cannot be concealed; they are known to every schoolboy. Sometimes he allows his own matured and carefully considered views on certain general literary questions to interfere with the impartial examination of a particular poem. He disliked irregular metres and fortuitous schemes of rhyme. He held the pastoral convention in poetry to be artificial, frigid, and over-worn. These opinions and tastes led him into his notorious verdict on *Lycidas*. And yet, when the noise of the shouting shall have died away, it may be questioned whether most of the points attacked by Johnson would ever be chosen by admirers of the poem for special commendation. Is there nothing artificial and far-fetched about the satyrs and the fauns with cloven heel? Is the

ceremonial procession of Triton, Camus, and St. Peter an example of Milton's imagination at its best? In short, does the beauty and wonder of the poem derive from the allegorical scheme to which Johnson objected? But I am almost frightened at my own temerity, and must be content to leave the question unanswered.

There were certain of the English poets whom Johnson, it is plain, disliked, even while he admired their work. His account of them is inevitably tinged by this dislike; yet his native generosity and justice never shine out more brightly than in the praises that he gives them. He disliked Milton; and no one has ever written a more whole-hearted eulogy of *Paradise Lost*. Unless I am deceived, he disliked many things in the character of Addison, yet any one who would praise Addison nobly and truly will find himself compelled to echo Johnson's praises. A more profound difference of feeling separated him from Swift. He excuses himself from writing a fuller account of Swift's life, on the ground that the task had already been performed by Dr. Hawkesworth. But Hawkesworth's *Life* is a mere piece of book-making, and it seems likely that Johnson was glad to be saved from a duty that had no attractions for him. The contrast between himself and Swift may be best expressed in their own words: 'I heartily hate and detest that animal called man,' said Swift, 'although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth.' Johnson's attitude was the reverse of this. He used to say that the world was well constructed, but that the particular people disgraced the elegance and beauty of the general fabric. Yet it was he, not the hearty lover of 'John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth', who had the deeper sense of the tie that binds man to man. That men should dare to



hate each other in a world where they suffer the like trials and await the same doom was hardly conceivable to Johnson. That a man should dare to stand aloof from his kind and condemn them was a higher pitch of arrogance, destined to end in that tempest of madness and hate which is the Fourth Book of *Gulliver's Travels*.

Lastly, it cannot be denied that Johnson did scant justice to Gray; although here, again, his praise of the *Elegy* could hardly be bettered. The causes of this imperfect sympathy are easy to understand. Gray was a recluse poet, shy, sensitive, dainty, who brooded on his own feelings and guarded his own genius from contact with the rough world. 'He had a notion,' says Johnson, 'not very peculiar, that he could not write but at certain times, or at happy moments; a fantastic foppery, to which my kindness for a man of learning and virtue wishes him to have been superior.' Surely this impatience will seem only natural to those who remember the story of Johnson's life. He had lived for thirty years, and had supported others, solely by the labours of his pen. The pay he received was often wretchedly small. Fifteen guineas was the price of the copyright of the *Life of Savage*. He was driven from task to task, compelled to supply the booksellers with what they demanded, prefaces, translations, or sermons at a guinea a piece. In spite of sickness and lassitude and intense disinclination, the day's work had to be done, and when work did not come to hand, it had to be sought and solicited. It is not easy for us to imagine the conditions of literature in London when Johnson first came there, and for many years after,—the crowds of miserable authors, poor, servile, jealous, and venal. Immersed in this society he laboured for years. The laws that he

imposed on his drudgery were never broken. He made no personal attacks on others, and answered none on himself. He never complied with temporary curiosity, nor enabled his readers to discuss the topic of the day. He never degraded virtue by the meanness of dedication. There was nothing in his writings to disclaim and nothing to regret, for he always thought it the duty of an anonymous author to write as if he expected to be hereafter known. When at last he was known, there was still no escape from hack-work and the necessities of the day. The books which he has added to the English Classics were written for bread—the *Dictionary*, the periodical papers, *Rasselas*, the Preface and Notes to Shakespeare (which will some day be recognized for what they are, the best and most luminous of eighteenth century commentaries on Shakespeare's drama), and the *Lives of the Poets*.

This is the greatness of Johnson, that he is greater than his works. He thought of himself as a man, not as an author; and of literature as a means, not as an end in itself. Duties and friendships and charities were more to him than fame and honour. The breadth and humanity of temper which sometimes caused him to depreciate the importance of literature, have left their mark on his books. There are some authors who exhaust themselves in the effort to endow posterity, and distil all their virtue in a book. Yet their masterpieces have something inhuman about them, like those jewelled idols, the work of men's hands, which are worshipped by the sacrifice of man's flesh and blood. There is more of comfort and dignity in the view of literature to which Johnson has given large utterance: 'Books without the knowledge of life are useless; for what should books teach but the art of living?'

## II

# ON THE TWO-HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF JOHNSON'S BIRTH

SEPTEMBER 18, 1909.

THE two hundred years that have passed since Samuel Johnson was born at Lichfield have given him a secure and unique position in the affections of his countrymen. He has almost become the tutelary genius of the English people. He embodies all that we most admire in ourselves. When we pretend to laugh at our national character, we call it John Bull; when we wish to glorify it, we call it Samuel Johnson. There have been greater writers among the English, but none of them would be so readily accepted as a public trustee. The supremacy of Shakespeare is not to be challenged, but Shakespeare is too great, too catholic, and, when all is said, too unintelligible, to stand for the typical Englishman. Moreover, Shakespeare is first of all a poet; his business is a kind of universal sympathy; and we do not know how to count on the man who exercised a faculty so illimitable and so chameleon-like. Johnson was an author almost by accident; it is the man who is dear to us, the man with all his dogmatic prejudices, his stoical courage, his profound melancholy, his hatred of sentimental palliatives, his fits of narrowness, his tenderness to all human frailty. If he has had less reputation than he deserves as a writer, it is because he has overshadowed his own fame. His success with the pen is like the success of a personal friend; it

pleases us, and enables us to vindicate our affection in the presence of those who have not yet learned to love him. As for ourselves, we know that he was capable of this, and more than this. He writes noble prose, but we read between the lines to find a more intimate delight. The splendid confident march of a reasoned paragraph is less to us than the traces we detect in it of our boon-fellow and teacher, with his exuberances and petulances and impulses of love and hate.

It is a wonderful triumph of character, and we feel it to be as creditable to us as to Johnson himself. If a purely literary history were made of the story of his life, the esteem in which he is held, amounting almost to idolatry, would indeed be difficult to explain. His greatest work, *The Lives of the Poets*, was produced, with pain and reluctance, when he was seventy years of age. In his early years, when he sought the notice of the public, he wrote two satires in verse, grave indeed and full of a sad sincerity, but not altogether unlike the imitative literary exercises of an admirer of Juvenal. Then followed a tale of anonymous essays, prefaces and translations, sufficient for their purpose, not rescued and reprinted until the close of the eighteenth century. The *Dictionary*, great work though it be, might have been successfully carried through by a merely mechanical genius. *The Rambler* was never popular; for every one reader that it found Addison's *Spectator* found sixty. *The Idler* was hardly more successful. *Rasselas*, that most melancholy of fables, and the *Journey to the Western Hebrides*, that most ceremonious of diaries, enjoyed what can only be called a success of esteem. In short, no one of Johnson's works marked a sudden or decisive

conquest of the public, unless it were the *Dictionary*, which was a laborious piece of compilation. Yet their effect was cumulative; their author went on living and talking and writing in London, until by a slow and insensible process he was recognized as the greatest man of his time. Superstition began to attach to his sayings and doings. He had never made any advances to the public; and the public, which is like a cat in its devotion to those who ignore it, came to him and fawned on him. The tribute was paid, not to his success in pleasing, but to his careless strength. The public, after all, is a shrewd critic of its worshippers and sectaries. When a man studies it and flatters it, it is pleased, but not deceived. It knows itself to be the patron of its most zealous suitors, and treats them with a certain proprietary kindness. No one ever dared to approach Johnson in this fashion; he never had a patron, he never went a yard out of his way to court public approbation, for twenty years he held on without complaint, until in the end he dominated and enslaved the opinion that he had not sought to conciliate. Some writers are great by their power of self-expression; they distil themselves in a book, and give away all their secrets. A small man can produce a great book if he knows how to put almost the whole of himself into it. What remains is a mere husk, to disappoint admirers of the book who seek for a more personal contact with its author. Rousseau, whom Johnson held to be a very bad man, might be regarded in another light as a very empty man, the wasted matrix of a very remarkable book. Johnson was great by his reserves; the best of him was withheld from literature; his books were mere outworks. Behind those ramparts his life was passionately private, so that



those who gained access to the warmth and light that were within felt privileged indeed. They had not to fear that they would be betrayed to make a public holiday. It is small wonder that the public, who were denied so much, felt the torment of curiosity, and at last submitted themselves absolutely to the dictator of the age. They came in all humility, not as patrons, but as pupils. Johnson was constitutionally incapable of gratifying a patron by writing or by speech; his conversation was a long series of surprises; it was not his wont to fulfil the expectations of those who talked with him. To enjoy his company a man was compelled to qualify either as a combatant or as a disciple. It is a part of the virtue of Boswell that he did well in both characters.

Johnson was a famous moralist, but it would be wrong to attribute his deepest influence to this cause, unless morality be understood in the widest of all possible senses. A man who is praised for his morality is praised not so much for himself as for his conformity to certain recognized standards. Johnson, it is true, was a conformist by principle, but the most winning part of his character was all his own. He is the humorous Englishman, who, if he cannot please by being himself, is content not to please, and gives the matter no further thought. The other peoples of Great Britain, the Scotch and the Welsh, seldom attain to this natural and regal simplicity. They are uneasily aware of a civilization stronger than their own, pressing on them at all points; so that they often run to the extremes of defiance and servility. The adaptability of the Scot has been a great instrument of empire, but the key to the imperial position is to be found in English custom and English character, as it is exemplified in Samuel Johnson. He was as self-

contained and simple as a child—often, too, as wayward as a child. A kind of luminous sincerity and individuality is what makes him so irresistible. Report, even the report of Boswell, probably does too little justice to the incalculable part of Johnson's character—to the sayings that he uttered when he was thinking aloud. A reporter remembers what he understands, and sets down what his readers will appreciate. The genius of Boswell appears not least in this, that he was willing, on occasion, to record Johnson's most whimsical and irresponsible remarks. But he must have omitted or neglected by far the greater number. Those that he has preserved are perhaps the most delightful and convincing things in his book. 'I find,' said Johnson, after his interview with King George, 'that it does a man good to be talked to by his Sovereign. In the first place, a man cannot be in a passion——' Here he was interrupted, and his account of other lesser advantages is lost to the world. 'A man who rides out for an appetite,' he once said, 'consults but little the dignity of human nature.' Or take Boswell's half-apologetic record of an evening spent at Mr. Robert Chambers's in the Temple, in the company of a gentleman who had just employed Mr. Chambers to draft his will, devising his estate to his three sisters, in preference to a remote heir male. Johnson called the sisters 'three *dowdies*', and maintained that an ancient estate should always go to males.

I have known him at times [says the biographer] exceedingly diverted at what seemed to others a very small sport. He now laughed immoderately, without any reason that we could perceive, at our friend's making his will; called him the *testator*, and added, 'I daresay he thinks he has done a mighty thing. He won't stay

till he gets home to his seat in the country, to produce this wonderful deed; he'll call up the landlord of the first inn on the road; and, after a suitable preface upon the mortality and the uncertainty of life, will tell him that he should not delay making his will; and "here, Sir," will he say, "is my will, which I have just made, with the assistance of one of the ablest lawyers in the kingdom"; and he will read it to him (laughing all the time). He believes he has made this will; but he did not make it; you, Chambers, made it for him. I trust you have had more conscience than to make him say, "being of sound understanding;" ha, ha, ha! I hope he has left me a legacy. I'd have his will turned into verse, like a ballad.'

In this playful manner did he run on, exulting in his own pleasantry, which certainly was not such as might be expected from the author of *The Rambler*, but which is here preserved that my readers may be acquainted even with the slightest occasional characteristics of so eminent a man.

Something of Boswell's genius is revealed in a passage like this. The genius of Johnson is harder to capture and define. Perhaps it might be said to consist in an unflinching instinct for the realities of life. When he utters what sounds like a commonplace, it will be found on examination to be something far different from a commonplace, something that calls attention back to the forgotten essential, which, when once it is remembered, puts an end to the idle play of theory. 'A man is loath to be angry at himself.' 'Babies do not want to hear about babies.' 'The great end of comedy is to make an audience merry.' 'When a man is tired of London he is tired of life.' 'A cow is a very good animal in a field, but we turn her out of a garden.' 'No man is a hypocrite in his pleasures.' 'It is a sad thing for a man to lie down and die.' These are not wit in the usual sense of that word; but if they be understood in their

context, as they were suggested by the discussion in hand, they are rarer and more potent than any wit. Nothing that Johnson ever said could conceivably be coveted by George Selwyn, or Theodore Hook, or Douglas Jerrold. He retailed no anecdotes. To Lord Shelburne, who once asked him to repeat a story for the benefit of some who had not heard it, he replied, 'Indeed, my lord, I will not. I told the circumstance first for my own amusement, but I will not be dragged in as story-teller to a company.' Life was for him too short and serious (and, it might be added, too full of real delight) to be wasted in the recital of irrelevant jests. 'A story,' he said once, 'is a specimen of human manners, and derives its sole value from its truth.' Even its truth would not justify the recital unless it were a useful truth, apposite to the discourse, or fit for the need of the moment. He never cheapened life, nor depreciated company, by embellishing it with imported wit and wisdom, as musicians are called in to entertain those who have neither the will nor the power to entertain one another. He was a lover of company, and a lover does not value these aids to social pleasure. He was a moralist, a great expounder of general truths, yet it was he who said, 'I had rather see the portrait of a dog that I know than all the allegorical pictures they can show me in the world.'

Because all Johnson's wisdom is vital, springing from the occasion, he is the first of all our great men dead whom we would choose to revive for the sake of his commentary on the events of our own age. Boswell loved to test his great man by devising new situations and multiplying occasions for judgement. Who would not wish to be the first to travel with Johnson in a motor-

car? What would have been his criticism if he had been told that the pulpit of the cathedral church of Lichfield was to be used for a sermon eulogizing his virtues? We cannot tell; no one ever succeeded in anticipating his verdicts. But we may be sure that he would have felt a pleasure as deep as life in the thought that two hundred years after the day of his birth he would be loved by his countrymen and honoured by a national celebration.



### III

## JOHNSON WITHOUT BOSWELL

WHEN Boswell was preparing to give to the public his *Life of Samuel Johnson*, he knew what he was doing. 'I am absolutely certain,' he wrote to his friend Temple, in February, 1788, 'that my mode of biography, which gives not only a *History* of Johnson's *visible* progress through the world, and of his publications, but a *view* of his mind in his letters and conversations, is the most perfect that can be conceived, and will be more of a Life than any work that has ever yet appeared.'

His confidence was well warranted; he has fairly vanquished all his competitors, and has established his claim to be both the author of the best biography that has ever yet appeared and the single sufficient expositor of his great theme. Yet he was not the first in the field. Johnson died in 1784, and before Boswell's book was published in 1791 there had been six other attempts to tell the story. The earliest of these, *A Biographical Sketch of Dr. Samuel Johnson* (1784), was by Thomas Tyers, the son of the founder of Vauxhall Gardens. He was a man of a handsome fortune and a lively temper, impatient of the drudgery of the legal profession, to which he had been bred. 'He therefore,' says Boswell, 'ran about the world with a pleasant carelessness, amusing everybody by his desultory conversation.' The sketch of Tom Restless in Number 48 of *The Idler* was intended by Johnson for a portrait of Tyers. Tom 'does not care to spend much time among authors; for he is of opinion that few books deserve the labour of perusal, that they give the mind

an unfashionable cast, and destroy that freedom of thought and easiness of manners indispensably requisite to acceptance in the world. *Tom* has therefore found another way to wisdom. When he rises he goes into a coffee-house, where he creeps so near to men whom he takes to be reasoners as to hear their discourse, and endeavours to remember something which, when it has been strained through *Tom's* head, is so near to nothing that what it once was cannot be discovered.' Tyers' sketch of Johnson is a slight piece of work, but it has some vivid detail, and is more than once quoted by Boswell.

The next to adventure was the bookseller Kearsley, who had already, before Johnson's death, published a selection of *Beauties* from *The Rambler*. The *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (1785) published by Kearsley is said to have been compiled by William Cook, of the Middle Temple, barrister-at-law, who subsequently wrote *Memoirs of Foote* and of Macklin. Cook was a member of the Essex Head Club, founded by Johnson in the last year of his life, but his *Life* (if it be his) is a mere trading venture, hastily launched to catch the favourable breeze. The *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the late Dr. Samuel Johnson*, which was printed the same year for J. G. Walker, is commonly attributed to the Rev. William Shaw, a native of the Hebrides, whom Johnson had encouraged to prepare a Gaelic dictionary. A much more noteworthy book, by an author with a larger claim in Johnson, was issued the following year. *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson LL.D. during the last twenty years of his life*, by Hester Lynch Piozzi (1786) is Mrs. Thrale's contribution to our knowledge of her friend and preceptor. It

must have agitated Boswell not a little, while his own book was slowly rising on the stocks, to hear that the whole first edition of Mrs. Piozzi's *Anecdotes* had sold out on the day of issue, and that four editions at least had been called for within a year after publication. But he bided his time, and, in spite of brief intervals of distraction and dissipation, went on steadily with his work.

*An Essay on the Life, Character, and Writings of Dr. Samuel Johnson*, by Joseph Towers, LL.D. (1786) is the most censorious of these early biographies. It is written to teach Johnson's eulogists that 'as he had great excellencies, he had also great weaknesses; and the latter appear sometimes to have been nearly as conspicuous as the former'. The author, Joseph Towers, had lived a life singularly like Johnson's in some of its outward aspects. He was the son of a bookseller; he had struggled with poverty, and had attained to Latin and Greek; he had come to London to seek his fortune, and had borne a hand in the *Biographia Britannica* and other large literary undertakings; he was himself an active political pamphleteer and a writer of *Lives*, long and short; he had been decorated, by the University of Edinburgh, with the degree of Doctor of Laws. The parallel will stretch no further, for Towers was a dissenting minister and a violent Whig. Boswell, while professing abhorrence for his 'democratical notions and propensities', yet speaks of him kindly as 'an ingenious, knowing, and very convivial man'. This, coming from a connoisseur of good company, is strong evidence; yet nothing could be less convivial than the temper of the *Essay*, which, while it quarrels with Johnson's fame, adds nothing to our knowledge of his life. Indeed, the

sympathy of the writer is given less to Johnson than to certain unnamed virtuous men who have had to content themselves with a smaller share of public approbation. 'There have been many men, who were more uniformly pious, and more uniformly benevolent, than Dr. Johnson, and who had neither his arrogance, nor his bigotry; and such men, in a moral and religious view, were superior characters. There were such men before the death of this celebrated writer, and there can be no reasonable doubt but that such men are yet remaining.' What if one of them were Dr. Joseph Towers?

The last of these predecessors of Boswell is Sir John Hawkins, knight, who published his *Life of Dr. Samuel Johnson* in 1787. Since the early days of *The Gentleman's Magazine*, Hawkins had been a friend of Johnson, who called him 'a most unclubable man', but permitted no one else to abuse him. Boswell speaks of his 'bulky tome' not without respect—indeed, Hawkins and Mrs. Thrale are the only two biographers of Johnson whom he treats seriously as rivals. If he sometimes seems to envy them, it is envy not of their literary skill, but of their prolonged intimacy with Johnson, and their matchless opportunities. They have both been too much neglected and decried; Boswell has conquered but has not superseded them, and their best reminiscences and anecdotes are almost as good as anything to be found in his own pages.

The stream of independent record was not checked by the appearance of Boswell's *Life*. A collected edition of Johnson's works, in twelve volumes, was published in 1792, with a prefatory *Essay on the Life and Genius of Samuel Johnson*, written by Arthur Murphy, editor of Fielding, biographer of Garrick, and

member of the Essex Head Club. To the formal *Lives* there must also be added the many valuable memories incidentally preserved by Miss Burney, Miss Hannah More, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Bishop Percy, and others of Johnson's friends and acquaintances. Never was there a more ignorant fable than the fable which makes Boswell the creator of Johnson's greatness. 'The death of Doctor Johnson,' says Murphy, 'kept the public mind in agitation beyond all former example. No literary character ever excited so much attention.' 'His death,' wrote Hannah More, 'made a kind of era in literature.' There is a cloud of witnesses to the pre-eminence and influence of Johnson. Yet Boswell has so far set himself in glory above his peers that no other witnesses are much esteemed. Hence it is worth the pains to inquire—What should we know of Johnson if Boswell had never written? How far is Boswell's account confirmed by the testimony of others? Can Boswell's narrative be shown to be in any respect biased, or partial, or erroneous?

The first of these questions is easily answered. If Boswell had never lived, or if he had never turned his face towards that noblest prospect for a Scotchman, the high road that leads to England, we should still know more of Johnson than we know of Swift; and we know more of Swift, by way of personal reminiscence, than we know of any other of our great writers before the time of Johnson. The recorded impressions of Delany, Sheridan, Mrs. Pilkington, and others, enable us to see Swift as he lived, and to overhear his casual discourse. Compared with him Addison is a mere ghost. For twelve years of his life Addison resided at Oxford, first at Queen's College, and then at Magdalen. He is said



to have been a social man,—though doubtless he was one of those men who are never so frankly and easily social as when they have a pen in the hand. Yet only one fragment of his conversation has been preserved. ‘Mr. Collins, of Magdalen College,’ says Hearne, ‘tells me that Mr. Joseph Addison of their College (who was afterwards Secretary of State) used to please himself mightily with this prologue to a puppet-show: “*A certain king said to a beggar, What hast to eat? Beans, quoth the beggar. Beans? quoth the king. Yea, beans, I say, and so forthwith we straight begin the play.*”’ This is all that has been rescued of the talk of a wit and a scholar during twelve years of social converse.

Johnson’s talk was remembered and recorded by many of those who had to do with him. His lightest sayings had a quality about them, an appositeness and a sincerity, which often stamped them even upon the laziest imagination. If they sometimes seem more wonderful to the recorder than they seem to a later and less excited audience, that is because they had all the force of a massive character behind them when they were spoken, and not less because they were always opportune, and took a great part of their meaning from circumstances which we cannot perfectly recreate. Boswell is fuller and more accurate in his accounts than any other of the chroniclers. But the work that he did was not peculiar to him, and if he had never written, Johnson’s conversation would still be known to us for a live and luminous thing.

There is no meaning in the facts of life till the mind begins to play upon them. The most exact historian is often surprised, and (if he be a very stupid man) perturbed, to find that the convincing and vivid parts of his

narrative are those where he permits himself to be an artist. Boswell was a great artist in portraiture; he desired the world to see the character of his friend as he himself saw it; nor was it without intent that he dedicated his work to Sir Joshua Reynolds, as to one who had 'perceived all the shades which mingled in the grand composition'. The choice of details for emphasis is a choice dictated by pleasure, and those traits in Johnson which had given high delight to Boswell are brought into strong relief in his work. All powerful portraits tend to caricature. On the other hand, all exact and truthful histories tend to pay so minute a reverence to fact that they will rather record what seems insignificant than run the risk of losing what may, after all, prove to be essential. Both these tendencies are seen in Boswell's work. Sometimes he will paint in broad tones; at other times he will give importance to the smallest trifles by the eagerness of his reverence. What the historian might excusably have omitted is not too small for the worshipper. The attitude of Boswell is well described by Miss Burney, in a famous passage. They met, rival satellites, at the table of the Thrales. Boswell had come on a morning visit, and a collation was ordered, where all the guests were assembled. When Boswell was preparing to take the seat next to Johnson, which he regarded as his own by right, he was told, to his surprise and disgust, that that seat was reserved for Miss Burney. He reluctantly got another chair, and placed it at the back of Johnson's shoulder, so that he might hear what was said. 'Of everyone else,' says Miss Burney, 'when in that presence, he was unobservant, if not contemptuous. In truth, when he met with Dr. Johnson, he commonly for-

bore even answering anything that went forward, lest he should miss the smallest sound from that voice to which he paid such exclusive, though merited, homage. But the moment that voice burst forth, the attention which it excited in Mr. Boswell amounted almost to pain. His eyes goggled with eagerness; he leant his ear almost on the shoulder of the Doctor; and his mouth dropped open to catch every syllable that might be uttered: nay, he seemed not only to dread losing a word, but to be anxious not to miss a breathing; as if hoping from it, latently or mystically, some information.' Presently, Johnson, discovering the intruder at his elbow, 'turned angrily round upon him, and, clapping his hand rather loudly upon his knee, said, in a tone of displeasure: "What do you do there, Sir? Go to the table, Sir!"'

Mrs. Thrale comments with some asperity on the reverential habits of the biographer. 'A trick,' she says, 'which I have, however, seen played on common occasions, of sitting stealthily down at the other end of the room to write at the moment what should be said in company, either *by* Dr. Johnson or *to* him, I never practised myself, nor approved of in another. There is something so ill-bred, and so inclining to treachery in this conduct, that were it commonly adopted, all confidence would soon be exiled from society, and a conversation assembly-room would become tremendous as a court of justice.'

Boswell did not exaggerate the value, for his record, of what Johnson said to others. What was said to himself, while he had his note-book in hand, was not likely to have much of the ease of social conversation. It is plain that Johnson was often amused, and often irritated, by the habits of his scribe. He disliked, above all,

being put to the question. Boswell prided himself on his talent in drawing people out, and certainly was both courageous and skilful at the business. The directness of his assault when he talked to Johnson has this excuse, that Johnson, on the testimony of his friends, never started a topic of conversation. He left others to put up the game, and was content to shoot it. 'No one,' says Mrs. Thrale, 'was less willing to begin any discourse than himself: his friend Mr. Thomas Tyers said, he was like the ghosts, who never speak till they are spoken to: and he liked the expression so well that he often repeated it. He had, indeed, no necessity to lead the stream of chat to a favourite channel, that his fullness on the subject might be shewn more clearly, whatever was the topic; and he usually left the choice to others.' Boswell tells, in *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, how, when they were shown the military stores at Fort George, Johnson made a very good figure in conversation with the officers on the various stages of the manufacture of gunpowder.

This is how it comes about that Johnson's retorts are sometimes not fully expressive of himself, and must not be taken to convey his most deeply cherished convictions. He did not choose the subject, and when others chose it he was often displeased by the choice.

Boswell, for instance, attributes to him in many passages an almost sentimental horror of the very name of death. It is true that Johnson thought often of death; but he did not think of it sentimentally. 'When we were alone,' says Boswell, under the year 1769, 'I introduced the subject of death, and endeavoured to maintain that the fear of it might be got over.' After some exchange of argument, Johnson answered, in a passion, 'No, Sir,

let it alone. It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts so short a time. . . . A man knows it must be so and submits. It will do him no good to whine.' 'I attempted,' says Boswell, 'to continue the conversation. He was so provoked, that he said, "Give us no more of this"; and was thrown into such a state of agitation that he expressed himself in a way that alarmed and distressed me; showed an impatience that I should leave him, and when I was going away, called to me sternly, "Don't let us meet to-morrow".'

Is it not easy to imagine the scene? The pleasant, excitable, insistent voice of Boswell,—'With regard to death, Sir'; Johnson's brief, wise verdict, and dismissal of the topic; Boswell's mosquito-like return, and Johnson's outburst of wrath. It was not death that he feared; it was Boswell on death. He did not always shun the subject. His friend, John Hoole, tells how on November 30th, 1784, less than a fortnight before his death, 'Frank bringing him a note, as he opened it he said an odd thought struck him, that one should receive no letters in the grave.' Grim fancies on death were natural to him; tittle-tattle about it he could not bear.

If Boswell is sometimes all unconscious of the meaning of Johnson's reproofs, so is Mrs. Thrale. Mrs. Thrale was a lively, feather-headed lady, with a good deal of natural wit, and a perfect confidence in the exercise of it. Boswell disliked her, as his most highly-favoured competitor, but it is impossible to read her *Anecdotes* without falling under the spell of her easy, irresponsible charm. There is no sufficient reason to challenge her good faith, but her code of truth is not severe, and many of the facts that she narrates become lies under her touch. So, in



speaking of Johnson's expressions of contempt, she gives as an instance a retort that he made to her. 'He was no gentler with myself, or those for whom I had the greatest regard. When I one day lamented the loss of a first cousin killed in America—"Prithee, my dear (said he), have done with canting: how would the world be worse for it, I may ask, if all your relations were at once spitted like larks, and roasted for Presto's supper?" Presto was the dog that lay under the table while we talked.'

One story is good till another is told. Joseph Baretti, who had been for some years a tutor in the Thrales' house, was fortunately present at this conversation, and gave his version, which, on the face of it, is the true one. 'Mrs. Thrale,' he says, 'while supping very heartily upon larks, laid down her knife and fork, and abruptly exclaimed, "O, my dear Mr. Johnson, do you know what has happened? The last letters from abroad have brought us an account that our poor cousin's head was taken off by a cannon-ball." Johnson, who was shocked both at the fact, and her light, unfeeling manner of mentioning it, replied, "Madam, it would give *you* very little concern if all your relations were spitted like those larks and drest for Presto's supper".'

Is not this a live piece of drama? Mrs. Thrale, quite unaware of any cause in herself, and her flow of pleasant chatter, for Johnson's reproof, took it as a gratuitous display of surliness and rudeness, showing how a great philosopher can be deficient in humane feeling. She does not even mention that she was eating larks, so that the larks, which were her own supper, become, under her light hand, a merely rhetorical adornment of Johnson's invective. Yet it is strange that she did not see

what he meant, for she understood and put on record several similar reproofs. Here is one of them: 'I was saying to a friend one day that I did not like goose; one smells it so while it is roasting, said I. "But you, Madam (replies the Doctor), have been at all times a fortunate woman, having always had your hunger so forestalled by indulgence, that you never experienced the delight of smelling your dinner beforehand." "Which pleasure," answered I pertly, "is to be enjoyed in perfection by such as have the happiness to pass through Porridge-Island of a morning." "Come, come (says he gravely), let's have no sneering at what is so serious to so many: hundreds of your fellow-creatures, dear Lady, turn another way, that they may not be tempted by the luxuries of Porridge-Island to wish for gratifications they are not able to obtain: you are certainly not better than all of them; give God thanks that you are happier".'

These retorts, to Boswell and to Mrs. Thrale, show Johnson as he was, unfailingly serious and sympathetic and imaginative about the great elemental things. Boswell had not thought deeply about death, Mrs. Thrale had not experienced poverty or imagined it in its effects; Boswell was argumentative, like a Scottish philosopher, on death; Mrs. Thrale was flippant, like a fashionable lady, on poverty—hence the fierceness of Johnson's replies.

It would be easy to show how each of the biographies of Johnson is limited and coloured by the predilections of the writer, and by the nature of his, or her, relationship to the great man. Johnson's talk, even though it be faithfully recorded, loses most of its value when it is taken out of its setting. No one says all that he thinks in talk. He selects only what has some relation to the

company and the circumstances. We must know the company and the circumstances before we can understand the talk. It is one of Boswell's greatest merits that he is careful of his background; wherever it is possible he gives us a full and true account of the persons present, and the incidents and remarks that prompted Johnson's speech.

Another cause of Boswell's superiority is his care for truth, even in the minutest details. Some part of this care he may have learned from his master; like Reynolds, he was 'of Johnson's school'. Perhaps no book so rich in opportunities for error has ever come through a century of minute study and criticism with so little damage to its reputation as Boswell's *Life*. The author invented nothing and suppressed nothing, and his book stands. Yet in the main his details contribute to the portrait, and that portrait is Boswell's Johnson. A little emphasis here and there, a judicious management of the light, a lively touch of the brush or of the pen,—these are enough for the painter or the biographer who wishes to convey his own meaning. All later writers on Johnson are copyists of Boswell. Macaulay exaggerated the picture and vulgarized it, but suggestions for his caricature are already to be found in Boswell. Take, for instance, the question of Johnson's manner of eating. Boswell's description is well known. 'I never knew any man who relished good eating as he did. When at table, he was totally absorbed in the business of the moment; his looks seemed rivetted to his plate; nor would he, unless when in very high company, say one word, or even pay the least attention to what was said by others, till he had satisfied his appetite, which was so fierce, and indulged with such intenseness, that while in the act of eating,

the veins of his forehead swelled, and generally a strong perspiration was visible.' No doubt Boswell had seen Johnson on one or more occasions, as he here describes him. Hawkins says, 'It was, at no time of his life, pleasing to see him at a meal.' On the other hand, Bishop Percy, under whose roof Johnson lived for many weeks says that Boswell's description is extremely exaggerated. 'He ate heartily, having a good appetite, but not with the voraciousness described by Mr. Boswell; all whose extravagant accounts must be read with caution and abatement.' And Richard Cumberland says, 'He fed heartily but not voraciously, and was extremely courteous in his commendations of any dish that pleased his palate.' In the *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* Boswell himself had remarked, 'I observed that he was disgusted whenever he met with coarse manners.'

These quotations make it plain that here is a question of degree, to be determined 'not dogmatically, but deliberately'. It is perhaps fair to conclude that Johnson ate zealously, and with conviction. The fervour of his temper expressed itself in a hundred ways, and this no doubt was one of them. Boswell's account is probably a little exaggerated; the most vivid of his memories of Johnson at table is imposed upon the reader as if it were a daily experience. Then came Macaulay; he seized upon the most picturesque of Boswell's scattered descriptive phrases, joined them in a single sentence, and heightened the picture out of all human recognition. 'The old philosopher is still among us, in the brown coat with the metal buttons and the shirt which ought to be at wash, blinking, puffing, rolling his head, drumming with his fingers, tearing his meat like a tiger, and swallowing his tea in oceans.'

The whole-hearted delight that was felt by Boswell in Johnson's dialectical triumphs, and particularly in his well-known knock-out blow, has perhaps given too strong an impression of his violence and rudeness in conversation. The roaring down of timid objectors, the loud, personal retorts, the attack on his adversaries with the butt-end of his pistol, these things are recorded by all, and cannot be denied. Yet it must be remembered that Johnson himself was hardly aware of them. The explosive force of his utterances was produced by the strong workings of his mind. He meant no offence, and was surprised and disquieted when he found that offence was taken. He was willing to fight on the smallest provocation, but he hated quarrels, and the feelings that beget quarrels. 'The cup of life,' he said, 'is surely bitter enough, without squeezing in the hateful rind of resentment.' He believed that the innocence of his heart was reflected in his manners. 'I look upon myself,' he once said to Boswell, 'as a very polite man.' And again, to Mrs. Thrale, he gave an even more complacent account. 'You may observe,' he said, 'that I am well-bred to a degree of needless scrupulosity. No man is so cautious not to interrupt another; no man thinks it so necessary to appear attentive when others are speaking; no man so steadily refuses preference to himself, or so willingly bestows it on another, as I do; nobody holds so strongly as I do the necessity of ceremony, and the ill effects which follow the breach of it: yet people think me rude.' Some part of this defence is supported by the testimony of Sir John Hawkins: 'He encouraged others, particularly young men, to speak, and paid a due attention to what they said.' And there is no doubt that when he took care of his own behaviour, and



was conscious of it, his manners were polished and courtly.

But when he joined issue in debate, he gave no quarter. 'In mixed company,' says Sir Joshua Reynolds, 'the most light and airy dispute was with him a dispute in the arena. He fought on every occasion as if his whole reputation depended upon the victory of the minute, and he fought with all the weapons. If he was foiled in argument, he had recourse to abuse and rudeness. That he was not thus strenuous for victory with his intimates in *tête-à-tête* conversations, may be easily believed.' Once, when he was reproached for too great warmth in a dispute with Burke, 'It may be so,' he replied, 'for Burke and I should have been of one opinion if we had had no audience.' And Reynolds lays great stress on the necessity of distinguishing the behaviour of Johnson in the prize-ring of debate from 'his natural disposition seen in his quiet hours'.

Boswell, of course, knew Johnson well in both moods. It is not so certain that he agreed with Johnson in preferring the quietness of intimate talk. 'That is the happiest conversation,' said Johnson, 'where there is no competition, no vanity, but a calm quiet interchange of sentiments.' But that is not the kind of conversation which Boswell has most fully recorded. The place of his meeting with Johnson was commonly a tavern or a social assembly, and his portrait is largely gladiatorial. There is nothing unfair in this; as a gladiator Johnson was known to a wide circle of social acquaintance, and he took a pride in his achievements. His description of his joy in battle has been preserved for us by Hawkins: 'As soon as I enter the door of a tavern, I experience an oblivion of care, and a freedom from solicitude: when

I am seated, I find the master courteous, and the servants obsequious to my call; anxious to know and ready to supply my wants: wine there exhilarates my spirits, and prompts me to free conversation and an interchange of discourse with those whom I most love: I dogmatize and am contradicted, and in this conflict of opinions and sentiments I find delight.' The company shared in this delight, and posterity has been made free of it. But the affection felt for Johnson by his friends had another root. All his dialectic dropped from him when he found himself alone, or in the presence of a single intimate. We come to closer quarters with Johnson in the best pages of *The Rambler* than in the most brilliant of the conversations recalled by Boswell. The hero of a hundred fights puts off his armour, and becomes a wise and tender confessor.

When Mrs. Thrale and Boswell knew him, Johnson, it must be remembered, was already famous. He was often liable to the intrusion of foolish persons, who came without invitation to consult him on their private affairs. They had heard of him as a celebrated man, and were willing to believe him an oracle. Mrs. Thrale has given an account, which we could ill spare, of some of these visitors. In his happy retreat at Streatham Johnson would sometimes tell stories of his experiences. Once he told the following tale: 'A person (said he) had for these last five weeks often called at my door, but would not leave his name or other message, but that he wished to speak with me. At last we met, and he told me that he was oppressed by scruples of conscience: I blamed him gently for not applying, as the rules of our church direct, to his parish priest or other discreet clergyman; when, after some compliments on his part, he told me, that he was

clerk to a very eminent trader, at whose warehouses much business consisted in packing goods in order to go abroad: that he was often tempted to take paper and packthread enough for his own use, and that he had indeed done so so often, that he could recollect no time when he ever had bought any for himself.—But probably (said I), your master was wholly indifferent with regard to such trivial emoluments; you had better ask for it at once, and so take your trifles with consent.—Oh, Sir! replies the visitor, my master bid me have as much as I pleased, and was half angry when I talked to him about it.—Then pray, Sir (said I), teize me no more about such airy nothings—and was going to be very angry, when I recollected that the fellow might be mad perhaps; so I asked him, When he left the counting-house of an evening?—At seven o'clock, Sir.—And when do you go to bed, Sir?—At twelve o'clock.—Then (replied I) I have at least learned thus much by my new acquaintance, that five hours of the four-and-twenty unemployed are enough for a man to go mad in; so I would advise you, Sir, to study algebra, if you are not an adept already in it: your head would get less *muddy*, and you will leave off tormenting your neighbours about paper and packthread, while we all live together in a world that is bursting with sin and sorrow.'

Another visitor was a young gentleman whose father had become wealthy, and who wished to qualify for genteel society. Johnson recommended the university: 'for you read Latin, Sir, with *facility*?' 'I read it a little, to be sure, Sir.' 'But do you read it *with facility*, I say?' 'Upon my word, Sir, I do not very well know, but I rather believe not.' Mr. Johnson now began, says Mrs. Thrale, to recommend other branches of science.

‘There arose some talk about animals and their divisions into oviparous and viviparous; And the cat here, Sir, said the youth who wished for instruction, pray in which class is she? Our doctor’s patience and desire of doing good began now to give way to the natural roughness of his temper. You would do well (said he) to look for some person to be always about you, Sir, who is capable of explaining such matters, and not come to us (there were some literary friends present as I recollect) to know whether the cat lays eggs or not: get a discreet man to keep you company, there are so many who would be glad of your table and fifty pounds a year.’

These stories were told by Johnson himself to Mrs. Thrale, who adds that what he told, or suffered to be told before his face without contradicting, has every possible mark of real and genuine authenticity. If the circumstances had been less fully explained, no doubt Johnson’s replies would have been quoted as examples of unprovoked rudeness in retort.

The long years of poverty and obscurity were not a school of social ease. When prosperity came, Johnson’s manners softened, yet he never attained to that ideal of smooth and tactful politeness which he has described with inimitable truth in his portrait of Mr. Fitzherbert: ‘There was no sparkle, no brilliancy in Fitzherbert; but I never knew a man who was so generally acceptable. He made everybody quite easy, overpowered nobody by the superiority of his talents, made no man think worse of himself by being his rival, seemed always to listen, did not oblige you to hear much from him, and did not oppose what you said.’ Such characters are the oil of society, yet a society made wholly of such characters would have no taste. Johnson’s dog-

matic freedom often made difficulties for those who associated with him ; indeed, as he himself remarked, it kept people of rank and fashion away from his company. ' I never courted the great,' he said to Boswell ; ' they sent for me ; but I think they now give me up. They are satisfied ; they have seen enough of me.' Boswell, always eager to keep a topic alive, suggested that they must surely be highly pleased with his conversation, but he answered, ' No, Sir ; great lords and great ladies don't love to have their mouths stopped.' It is remarked by Dr. Birkbeck Hill that only one man of hereditary title, Sir Charles Bunbury, was among the mourners at Johnson's funeral.

However dogmatic and fierce Johnson's conversation may have been, it was always extraordinarily free from egotism. He takes the floor with all comers, and does not make for himself a place apart, sheltered and superior. He has no exquisite reasons, and looks at life, not from a delicate angle of his own, but from the broad standing-ground of common humanity. A very large number of his most famous sayings are cast in a single mould ; almost all that he has to say can be expressed in sentences which have for subject ' A man ', or ' Every man '. ' A man loves to review his own mind.' ' Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier.' ' No man loves labour for itself.' If he had found his own tastes and opinions out of sympathy with average sentiment, he would have distrusted them, or rather, perhaps, would have thought them too trivial to mention. The true egotist nurses his singularity, and if he does not talk much of himself, desires at least that others should. Johnson nourished his intellect and his feelings on what he shared with all mankind. He had the soul of good



manners, though at times it was not perfectly embodied in act.

The tradition of Johnson's fixed antipathy to the Scottish people owes a great part of its strength and persistence to Boswell, who not only recorded Johnson's railing speeches against the Scotch, but provoked the larger number of them. His apologetic speech in Davies's shop, on his first introduction, put him at Johnson's mercy for the rest of his life. 'Mr. Johnson (said I), I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it.' From that time forward, Johnson delighted to indulge his humour, playful rather than hostile, on the sensitive nationality of his friend. The best of his sallies are written in the *Life*; but some, which Boswell omitted or forgot, are recorded by other writers. The Rev. Dr. Thomas Campbell notes in his *Diary* how Johnson 'seems fond of Boswell, and yet he is always abusing the Scots before him, by way of joke . . . Boswell lamented there was no good map of Scotland. "There never can be a good map of Scotland," says the Doctor sententiously. This excited Boswell to ask wherefore. "Why, Sir, to measure land, a man must go over it; but who could think of going over Scotland?"'

The truth of this matter is better explained by other less agitated historians than by Boswell himself. 'Johnson's invectives against Scotland,' says Bishop Percy, 'were more in pleasantry and sport than real or malignant; for no man was more visited by natives of that country, nor were there any for whom he had a greater esteem.' The ground of the antipathy is explained by Reynolds: 'Against the Irish he entertained no prejudice, he thought they united themselves very well with us; but the Scotch, when in England, united and made

a party by employing only Scotch servants and Scotch tradesmen. He held it right for Englishmen to oppose a party against them.' For some years before Johnson's meeting with Boswell Lord Bute had been in power, and had the name of showing undue favour to his own countrymen. How little of real hostile feeling there was in Johnson's light satire may be seen in his *Journey to the Western Islands*. He had a warm admiration, and a natural sympathy, for the feudal society of the Highlands, its courtesy and its pride. Richard Cumberland tells how he remonstrated with Johnson, urging that some passages in the *Journey* were too sharp upon a country and people that had showed him such generous hospitality: 'Do you think so, Cumbeys?' said Johnson. 'Then I give you leave to say, and you may quote me for it, that there are more gentlemen in Scotland than there are shoes.' A people that is poor and proud could desire no finer compliment.

Boswell's care for the unity of his picture is well seen in his treatment of Goldsmith. The title of his book committed him to something more than a portrait of Johnson. It runs: *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D. comprehending an Account of his studies and numerous works, in chronological order; a series of his epistolary correspondence and conversations with many eminent persons; and various original pieces of his composition, never before published: the whole exhibiting a view of literature and literary men in Great Britain, for near half a century, during which he flourished. By James Boswell, Esq.* But Johnson was to have the centre of the picture, with no rival. Goldsmith himself complained of this. 'One evening,' says Boswell, 'in a circle of wits, he found fault with me for talking of Johnson as entitled to the

honour of unquestionable superiority. "Sir (said he), you are for making a monarchy of what should be a republick". The accusation was true; Boswell acknowledged but one king, and made short work of all possible pretenders. Of these pretenders, Goldsmith was by far the most formidable. He was a much more popular author than Johnson. He was styled, by Johnson himself, 'a very great man.' But there was no room in Boswell's book for two very great men. So, in perfect good faith, and almost unconsciously, Boswell set himself to belittle Goldsmith. He introduces him as 'one of the brightest ornaments of the Johnsonian school', and thereafter consistently exhibits him as a humble disciple who was sometimes vain and foolish enough to enter into competition with his great master. For this view of Goldsmith Boswell more than once attempted to get Johnson's support. 'Sir,' he said, 'he is much indebted to you for his getting so high in the publick estimation.' Johnson's fairness of mind was proof against these temptations. 'Why, Sir,' he replied, 'he has perhaps got *sooner* to it by his intimacy with me.'

Partly, no doubt, Boswell was jealous of the older friend. Partly he was incapable of understanding the Irish humour, and thought it mere folly. The instances which he gives to illustrate Goldsmith's ridiculous envy are a strange proof of his own misapprehensions. Once when Goldsmith was travelling abroad in the company of the beautiful Miss Hornecks, and they all stood together in the window of their hotel at Lisle, to see the soldiers in the square, the beauty of the sisters excited marked admiration from below, and Goldsmith (who was not a handsome man), turning on his heel, remarked, with an air of pique, that he, too, had his admirers else-

where. The incident is narrated by Boswell in these words: 'When he was accompanying two beautiful ladies with their mother on a tour in France, he seriously angry that more attention was paid to her than to him.' The other instance needs no gloss: he sat at the exhibition of the *Fantoccini* in London, and those who sat next to him observed with what gravity a puppet was made to toss a pike, he could hear that it should have such praise, and exclaimed in some warmth, "Pshaw! I can do it better myself". He went home with Mr. Burke to supper; and broke his jest by attempting to exhibit to the company how much he could jump over a stick than the puppets.'

These incidents had occurred in one of Goldsmith's letters, they would have been taken, quite rightly, for good examples of sly humour. That Goldsmith should make himself ridiculous for his own and the company's amusement was not intelligible to Boswell. Indeed all Goldsmith's circle of friends and acquaintances were in a kind of conspiracy to despise him for his simplicity and quaintness. 'Whenever I write anything Goldsmith once complained, 'the publick *make* it to know nothing about it.' Whenever he said anything original or quaint, his friends made a point to treat it nothing but childish absurdity. Hawkins is as much so; Boswell. He records some most winning and beautiful sayings with angry and contemptuous comments. Here are a few of them:—

He was used to say that he could play on the German flute as well as most men.

He would frequently preface a story thus:—'I'll now tell you a story of myself, which some people laugh at, and some do not.'

At the breaking up of an evening at a tavern, he in-

treated the company to sit down and told them if they would call for another bottle they should hear one of his *bons mots*: they agreed, and he began thus:—‘I was once told that Sheridan the player, in order to improve himself in stage gestures, had looking-glasses, to the number of ten, hung about his room, and that he practised before them; upon which I said, then there were ten ugly fellows together.’ The company were all silent: he asked why they did not laugh, which they not doing, he, without tasting the wine, left the room in anger.

In a large company he once said, ‘Yesterday I heard an excellent story, and I would relate it now if I thought any of you able to understand it.’ The company laughed, and one of them said, ‘Doctor, you are very rude’; but he made no apology.

‘People,’ said he, ‘are greatly mistaken in me: a notion goes about that when I am silent I mean to be impudent; but I assure you, gentlemen, my silence arises from bashfulness.’

Having one day a call to wait on the late duke, then earl of Northumberland, I found Goldsmith waiting for an audience in an outer room; I asked him what had brought him there: he told me an invitation from his lordship. I made my business as short as I could, and, as a reason, mentioned that Dr. Goldsmith was waiting without. The earl asked me if I was acquainted with him: I told him I was, adding what I thought likely to recommend him. I retired, and staid in the outer room to take him home. Upon his coming out, I asked him the result of his conversation.—‘His lordship,’ says he, ‘told me he had read my poem,’ meaning the Traveller, ‘and was much delighted with it; that he was going lord-lieutenant of Ireland, and that, hearing that I was a native of that country, he should be glad to do me any kindness.’—And what did you answer, asked I, to this gracious offer? ‘Why,’ said he, ‘I could say nothing but that I had a brother there, a clergyman, that stood in need of help: as for myself, I have no dependence on the promises of great men: I look to the booksellers for support; they are my best friends, and I am not inclined to forsake them for others.’ Thus did this idiot, in the



affairs of the world, trifle with his fortunes, and put back the hand that was held out to assist him.

The whole problem of Ireland is illustrated in epitome by the commentators on Goldsmith. Johnson, it is true, did justice to him, and even Boswell is constrained to admit that 'he was often very fortunate in his witty contests, even when he entered the lists with Johnson himself'. The affair of the little fishes and the whales is narrated by Boswell. Goldsmith had one day said that he believed he could write a good fable, and could make the animals talk in character. 'For instance (said he), the fable of the little fishes, who saw birds fly over their heads, and envying them, petitioned Jupiter to be changed into birds. The skill (continued he) consists in making them talk like little fishes.' Johnson laughed at this speech—is it possible he was remembering that fishes cannot talk? But his laughter produced the famous retort—'if you were to make little fishes talk, they would talk like WHALES.'

The attitude of his friends to Goldsmith remains a puzzle. Perhaps the solution is that Miss Edgeworth's *Essay on Irish Bulls* marks a new era in the history of the national intellect, and that few Englishmen, and fewer Scotsmen, before her time, understood that fanciful form of speech, where wisdom masquerades as absurdity. However this may be, it is certain that the misunderstanding of Goldsmith continued long after his death. Samuel Rogers, the poet, made inquiry concerning Goldsmith of William Cook, who has been already mentioned in the list of Johnson's biographers. Cook was an old man when Rogers met him; he had been acquainted with Goldsmith in his youth. When he was asked what Goldsmith was like in conversation, his

answer was prompt. 'Sir,' he said, 'he was a fool. The right word never came to him. If you gave him back a bad shilling, he'd say, "Why, it's as good a shilling as ever was *born*." You know he ought to have said *coined*. *Coined*, sir, never entered his head. He was a fool, sir.'

From all this it follows that Boswell's opinion of Goldsmith is hardly of greater value than Carlyle's opinion of Lamb. 'A more pitiful, rickety, gasping, staggering, stammering Tom-fool,' wrote Carlyle, 'I do not know. . . .' 'Poor Lamb! Poor England, when such a despicable abortion is named genius!' Boswell did not pillory himself in quite this zealous fashion, but his treatment of Goldsmith remains the most conspicuous of his errors.

The memories of Johnson preserved by Mrs. Thrale help out the picture of the non-combative side of his character. He lived with the Thrales as a member of their family; he joined in the children's games, and was not at all offended when, choosing animals as the counterparts of their various acquaintance, they pitched upon the elephant as his resemblance. If Boswell had passed so long a time under the same roof with him, we should doubtless have had a minute account of the course of his daily life. Mrs. Thrale has left us nothing of the kind; she observes the reticence of a hostess, and gives us barely a hint of the domestic problems that must have been presented to her by the habits of her exacting guest. She has been accused of writing her *Anecdotes* in self-defence, as a kind of apology for the last sad alienation, but there is little enough ground for this charge; her work is the work of a generous temper, and is a credit to her memory. Life at Streatham was

at that time life in the country, and she is able to exhibit the sage of Fleet Street in new and unfamiliar attitudes. Johnson rode on Mr. Thrale's old hunter, which must have been a strong and trustworthy beast, for its rider was heavy and short-sighted. He would follow the hounds fifty miles on end, but would never own himself either tired or amused. His comment on this much-esteemed sport is worthy of the author of *Rasselas* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. 'I have now learned,' said he, 'by hunting, to perceive that it is no diversion at all, nor ever takes a man out of himself for a moment ; the dogs have less sagacity than I could have prevailed on myself to suppose ; and the gentlemen often call to me not to ride over them. It is very strange, and very melancholy, that the paucity of human pleasures should persuade us ever to call hunting one of them.'

Some of the sayings set down by Mrs. Thrale are a valuable commentary on Johnson's published opinions. He objects, for instance, in his *Preface to Shakespeare*, to the extravagant importance often given by the drama to the passion of love ; and adds, 'Love is only one of many passions ; and as it has no great influence upon the sum of life, it has little operation in the dramas of a poet, who caught his ideas from the living world, and exhibited only what he saw before him.' This is a hard saying, not quite true perhaps either of Shakespeare or of life. Johnson may have been thinking of the excesses of the Heroic drama. But whenever he is betrayed into a too emphatic statement, the corrective may commonly be found elsewhere among his words and works. A lady at Mrs. Thrale's house said one day that she would make him talk about love ; and took her measures accordingly, deriding the novels of the day because they

treated about love. Johnson joined battle in a moment. 'It is not,' he said, 'because they treat, as you call it, about love, but because they treat of nothing, that they are despicable : we must not ridicule a passion which he who never felt never was happy, and he who laughs at never deserves to feel—a passion which has caused the change of empires and the loss of worlds—a passion which has inspired heroism and subdued avarice.'

Perhaps Boswell shows Johnson in too uniformly solemn a light. The seriousness of his own attitude, and his strong predilection for argument on grave topics, may have conduced to this. He must have felt that the whimsical and humorous side of Johnson's character did not sufficiently appear in the *Life*, for he appealed to Miss Burney to give him some material of a lighter kind. She was well able to do this, but was thrifty and wise enough to keep what she had for her own use. Doubtless when Boswell saw Johnson talking with great gaiety and pleasantry to Miss Burney, he was disquieted to recognize a vein that was not common in his own discourses with the sage. The other biographers almost all make a point of Johnson's playfulness. 'In the talent of humour,' says Hawkins, 'there hardly ever was his equal, except perhaps among the old comedians, such as Tarleton, and a few others mentioned by Cibber.' 'Dr. Johnson has more fun,' said Miss Burney, 'and comical humour, and love of nonsense about him, than almost anybody I ever saw.' Mr. Murphy, according to Mrs. Thrale, always said that he was incomparable at buffoonery. All this may no doubt be inferred from Boswell's pages, but is not very fully represented there, so that some of the most fascinating passages of Miss Burney's *Diary* surprise us by the novelty of the

portrait. Yet the eternal play of fancy in his mind is what gives their originality and delight to most of his sayings. What could be happier than his description of the habit of bustle—‘it is getting on horseback in a ship’? Or than his remark on education—‘You teach your daughters the diameters of the planets, and wonder, when you have done, that they do not delight in your company’? A sentiment often felt and often expressed will almost always gain vividness and quaintness from Johnson’s rendering of it. He received with contempt, says Mrs. Thrale, the praises of a certain pretty lady’s face and behaviour. ‘She says nothing, sir,’ he replied, ‘a talking blackamoor were better than a white creature who adds nothing to life, and by sitting down before one thus desperately silent, takes away the confidence one should have in the company of her chair, if she were once out of it.’ His criticism of a sermon on Friendship, delivered at ‘the trading end of the town’, shows the same activity of the faculty that bodies forth the forms of things unseen. ‘Why now,’ he said to Mrs. Thale, ‘is it not strange that a wise man, like our dear little Evans, should take it in his head to preach on such a subject, in a place where no one can be thinking of it?’ ‘Why, what are they thinking upon, sir?’ said she. ‘Why, the men are thinking on their money, I suppose, and the women are thinking of their mops.’

A distinguished psychologist has said that if the stupidest man on earth could be permitted for a moment to have a view of what is passing in the mind of a dog, he would be appalled at the total absence of fancy there. In the play of fancy Johnson excelled the stupid man as much as the stupid man excels the dog. If this power is, as some have thought it, the chief difference between



man and beast, it seems natural enough that he who surpassed other men in humanity should have surpassed them also in playfulness of mind.

Yet his fancy always plays about life, like the lightning about a ship. He made no empty jests, nor willingly listened to them. Once he made a pun—or rather, recognized that what he had said was a pun, and accepted the situation. A man was mentioned who anointed himself with oil, after the Greek fashion. ‘This man of Greece,’ said Johnson, alluding to him, ‘or *grease*, as you please to take it.’ This was a solitary accident. He hated all that tinsel of the mind under which jesters conceal their penury. His conversation is a record of human life and character, or a criticism on it. He paid an almost superstitious regard to exact truth in narration, not from care for his own reputation for veracity, but from a passionate interest in the science of human life, which would be immensely advanced if men would but record their feelings and experiences with minute care. He censured John Wesley for not making careful inquiry into the evidence for a story about a ghost. ‘What, sir!’ said Miss Seward, ‘about a ghost?’ ‘Yes, Madam,’ said Johnson, ‘this is a question which, after five thousand years, is yet undecided; a question, whether in theology or philosophy, one of the most important that can come before the human understanding.’

The best stories that are told of Johnson are not good stories at all, in the ordinary sense; they are specimens of human character. Boswell does not seem to have selected the sayings he records, though his memory would no doubt exercise a certain unconscious choice. He makes use of all he can remember, yet how many must be lost! They can never be recovered, or even

guessed at ; they were inspired by the circumstances of the case, and are as various as the incidents of human life. No such searching ordeal has ever been applied to any human character with the same result. Everything that Johnson said in conversation during the later part of his life was liable to be recorded for posterity. A merely clever man, talking for reputation, would have crumpled under the test ; Johnson has emerged from it unscathed. His truth and his humanity were a match for all they met ; so that to lose a year of his commentary on life is to lose a year, not of talk, but of life itself. There is a strange reality about his slightest recorded remark. All the little artifices of mutual self-deceit vanish at his approach. No one ever felt more keenly the death of a friend or relative. 'The death of my mother,' he wrote, ten years before it happened, 'is one of the few calamities on which I think with terror.' Yet he would not permit others to speak extravagantly of their losses ; 'for,' said he, 'we must either outlive our friends, you know, or our friends must outlive us ; and I see no man that would hesitate about the choice.'

What is the virtue of even the most trivial stories concerning Johnson ? Their power does not depend on anything exceptional in thought. His verdicts express common tastes, and seem to add value to the facts of every day. He took a gloomy view, sometimes, of the prospects of children when they should come to full age. But girls were less displeasing to him than boys ; 'and he loved (he said) to see a knot of little misses dearly.' One of the most characteristic of the pictures of him is given us by his friend Edmund Malone, who called on him in his lodging, a year or so before his death. 'I found him,' says Malone, 'in his arm-chair by the fire-

side, before which a few apples were laid. He was reading. I asked him what book he had got. He said the *History of Birmingham*. Local histories, I observed, were generally dull. 'It is true, sir, but this has a peculiar merit with me ; for I passed some of my early years, and married my wife there.' I supposed the apples were preparing as medicine. 'Why, no, sir ; I believe they are only there because I want something to do. These are some of the solitary expedients to which we are driven by sickness. I have been confined this week past ; and here you find me roasting apples, and reading the *History of Birmingham*.'

Boswell knew Johnson during only a single period of his life—a period of established pre-eminence and prosperity. Even so, he knew him chiefly in one aspect, as the great Cham of literature, taking his ease among his courtiers, and basking in the sunshine of his late-won success. He never knew him as Mrs. Thrale knew him—in the every-day round of domestic life ; nor as Goldsmith and Sir Joshua Reynolds knew him—a fellow-craftsman to be treated on terms of equality and brotherhood ; nor as Hannah More and Frances Burney knew him—playful, gentle, nonsensical, and protective. Least of all did he know him as Savage knew him—a young and proud man, stoical and ambitious, happy to be the disciple and confidant of an acknowledged poet, who could encourage him in his ideas and schemes for the future. All these, in many ways, knew Johnson better than Boswell knew him. But Boswell has distanced them all, in spite of their advantages, not because he was a fool, as Macaulay thinks, but because he loved Johnson better than they did. The *Life* is a monument to an affection that was almost a passion. Savage was

attentive to Johnson, and patronized him, and borrowed money of him ; Mrs. Thrale grew tired, before the end, of the burden of his masterful ways ; Goldsmith and Reynolds were companionable and friendly when they met him, and had many other things to think of when he was absent. Boswell was never tired, never pre-occupied with other thoughts, never superior to his opportunities. He was faithful, humble, and devoted, so that he has been laughed at for his almost dog-like attachment. But Johnson was worth it ; and it is Boswell's high distinction that he knew that Johnson was worth it. The world is not so constructed that a fool, by sheer force of loquacity and indiscretion, can make a pompous old dogmatist into one of the great live figures of its history. What happened was something very different. A man of profound humanity and conquering intellect lived a private life in London, never seeking public fame or exalted company, content to amuse his leisure hours with the conversation of his friends. So great was the force of his mind and character that he became famous in spite of himself, and his lightest sayings were treasured and chronicled by those about him. But only one of them fully saw what was passing before the eyes of all. Not every one can see a great event while it happens, or a great man while he lives. If Boswell had this power, it was because his mind, naturally quick and curious, was made almost preternaturally sensible by the overwhelming reverence and affection that he felt for Johnson. What a pity it is that neither Swift nor Goldsmith was worshipped as Johnson was worshipped, by a brother in the craft ! These had no Boswell. The fate that gave Boswell to Johnson may have been a blind fate.

But there is a hidden justice in things, and I suggest that no other so well deserved the tribute. It was not Boswell who made Johnson; it was Johnson who by his wealth of tenderness and sympathy, his understanding of the human situation, its joys and sorrows, awoke in the breast of his own generation a response which, diffused at first, and speaking in many voices, at last gathered strength and definiteness, and expressed itself in the voice of James Boswell.



## IV

### JOHNSON ON SHAKESPEARE

THE history of Johnson's dealings with Shakespeare extends over the greater part of his working life. An edition of Shakespeare was the earliest of his larger literary schemes. In 1745, when he was earning a scanty living by work for the booksellers, he published a pamphlet entitled *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth, with remarks on Sir T. H.'s (Sir Thomas Hanmer's) Edition of Shakespeare*. To this pamphlet, says Boswell, he affixed proposals for a new edition by himself. Then he was discouraged, and changed his mind. When he first thought of editing Shakespeare, he believed that he had only Rowe and Pope and Theobald to contend with and to supersede. But while his notes on *Macbeth* were in the press, Hanmer's edition appeared, and it became known to him that the great Warburton was engaged on the same task. Johnson allowed the specimen of his projected edition to go forward, but issued only a bare advertisement of his scheme. The proposals of 1756 cannot have been written at this earlier date, for in them Johnson speaks, with a certain pride, of his labours on the Dictionary. 'With regard,' he says, 'to obsolete or peculiar diction, the editor may perhaps claim some degree of confidence, having had more motives to consider the whole extent of our language than any other man from its first formation.' But the Dictionary

was not planned until the scheme for an edition of Shakespeare had broken down. It was necessary for Johnson, if he was to raise himself above the crowd of venal writers, to inscribe his name on some large monument of scholarship. Shakespeare was his first choice; when, perhaps through the timidity of the booksellers, that failed him, he turned his attention to Shakespeare's language, and in 1747 issued the *Plan for a Dictionary*, which he addressed to the Earl of Chesterfield.

The Dictionary was finished in 1755, and Johnson, compelled to find some new means of livelihood, returned to Shakespeare. Warburton's edition had in the meantime been added to the list of his rivals, but his own confidence had increased and his fame was established. The *Proposals for Printing the Dramatick Works of William Shakespeare*, which he issued in 1756, are magnificent in their range and discernment. The whole duty of a Shakespearian commentator and critic is here, for the first time, expounded. The complete collation of the early editions; the tracing of Shakespeare's knowledge to its sources; the elucidation of obscurities by a careful study of the language and customs of Shakespeare's time; the comparison of Shakespeare's work with that of other great poets, ancient and modern—all this and more is promised in the *Proposals*. He seems to have hoped that his edition would be final, and in order to give it that character he promised to reprint all that seemed valuable in the notes of earlier commentators. The whole project breathes that warm air of imagination in which authors design extensive and laborious works. It is possible, but not likely, that he set to work at

once on the edition. He originally promised that it should be published in December, 1757. When December came, he mentioned March, 1758, as the date of publication. In March he said that he should publish before summer. On June 27 of the same year Dr. Grainger wrote to Percy, 'I have several times called on Johnson to pay him part of your subscription. I say, part, because he never thinks of working, if he has a couple of guineas in his pocket; but if you notwithstanding order me, the whole shall be given him at once.' Perhaps it was after one of these calls that Johnson, stimulated to unusual effort, wrote to Thomas Warton, on June 1, 1758, 'Have you any more notes on Shakespeare? I shall be glad of them.' Five years later a young bookseller waited on him with a subscription, and modestly asked that the subscriber's name should be inserted in the printed list. 'I shall print no list of subscribers'; said Johnson, with great abruptness: then, more complacently, 'Sir, I have two very cogent reasons for not printing any list of subscribers;—one, that I have lost all the names,—the other, that I have spent all the money.' This magnanimous confession almost bears out the charge brought against him by Churchill in his satire, *The Ghost*, published in the spring of 1762:—

He for subscribers baits his hook,  
And takes their cash; but where's the book?  
No matter where; wise fear, we know,  
Forbids the robbing of a foe;  
But what, to serve our private ends,  
Forbids the cheating of our friends?

There was no evidence that Johnson was in any way perturbed by Churchill's attack, yet it was the means

of hastening the long-deferred edition. 'His friends,' says Hawkins, 'more concerned for his reputation than himself seemed to be, contrived to entangle him by a wager, or some other pecuniary engagement, to perform his task within a certain time.' In 1764 and 1765, according to Boswell's account, he was so busily engaged with the edition as to have little leisure for any other literary exertion. That is to say, he worked at it intermittently, and satisfied his conscience, after the manner of authors, by working at nothing else. In October, 1765, at last appeared *The Plays of William Shakespeare, in Eight Volumes, with the Corrections and Illustrations of Various Commentators; To which are added Notes by Sam. Johnson*. He had spent nine years on the work, but a longer delay would have been amply justified by the Preface alone, which Adam Smith styled 'the most manly piece of criticism that was ever published in any country'.

There is nothing singular or strange in this chapter of literary history. The promises of authors are like the vows of lovers; made in moments of careless rapture, and subject, during the long process of fulfilment, to all kinds of unforeseen dangers and difficulties. Of these difficulties Johnson has left his own account in the *Life of Pope*. 'Indolence, interruption, business, and pleasure,' he says, 'all take their turns of retardation; and every long work is lengthened by a thousand causes that can, and ten thousand that cannot be recounted. Perhaps no extensive and multifarious performance was ever effected within the term originally fixed in the undertaker's mind. He that runs against time has an antagonist not subject to casualties.' Something steadier and more habitual than

the fervour of the projecting imagination is required to carry through a long piece of editorial work. This more constant motive was supplied to Johnson by necessity. He did not pretend to write for pleasure. In a letter to his friend Hector, announcing the new edition of Shakespeare, he says: 'The proposals and receipts may be had from my mother, to whom I beg you to send for as many as you can dispose of, and to remit to her the money which you or your acquaintances shall collect.' In January, 1759, his mother died, and he wrote *Rasselas* in the evenings of one week, to defray the expenses of her funeral and to pay some little debts which she had left. The famous saying, 'No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money,' may thus be regarded as the voice of his own hard experience, but it is something more than that. It is Johnson's brief and epigrammatic statement of the unvarying relation between author and publisher. Though it has been cried out against as a wilful paradox, it is the creed of the professional author in all countries and at all times. Young poets may be satisfied with fame, rich amateurs with elegance, missionaries and reformers with influence. But the publisher who should depend for his livelihood on the labours of these three classes would be in a poor way, and indeed, if publishers would communicate to the world an account of their intimate transactions, they could tell how the author who is content with reputation for his first book talks of nothing but money when he comes to proffer his second. He has learnt wisdom. The vanity of authors, encouraged by the modesty of their employers and the superstition of the public, has imposed a kind of religious jargon on a purely commercial



operation. If there are qualities in literature which are above price, these are also to be found in the world of manufacture and finance—in that huge pyramid of loyalty which is modern industry, and that vast network of fidelity which is modern commerce. Yet iron-founders and cotton-brokers do not, in discussing the operations of their profoundly beneficent trades, express themselves wholly in terms of genius and virtue.

The later history of Johnson's Shakespeare is soon told. It was received, says Boswell, 'with high approbation by the publick,' and after passing into a second edition, was in 1773 republished by George Steevens, 'a gentleman not only deeply skilled in ancient learning, and of very extensive reading in English literature, especially the early writers, but at the same time of acute discernment and elegant taste.' Dr. Birkbeck Hill throws some doubt on Steevens' claims to taste. It was Steevens who praised Garrick for producing *Hamlet* with alterations, 'rescuing that noble play from all the rubbish of the fifth act'; and who recommended that the condemned passages should be presented, as a kind of epilogue, in a farce to be entitled *The Grave-Diggers ; with the pleasant Humours of Osrice, the Danish Macaroni*. But Steevens deserves praise for his antiquarian industry and knowledge. To procure all possible assistance Johnson wrote letters to Dr. Farmer of Emmanuel College and to both the Wartons. He was frequently consulted by Steevens, but the extent of his own contributions is best stated by himself in his letter to Farmer: 'I have done very little to the book.' He never took kindly to the labours of revision; and his first edition remains the authoritative text of his criticism.

His work on Shakespeare gave Johnson as good an opportunity as he ever enjoyed for exercising what he believed to be his chief literary talent. 'There are two things,' he once said to Sir Joshua Reynolds, 'which I am confident I can do very well: one is an introduction to any literary work, stating what it is to contain, and how it should be executed in the most perfect manner; the other is a conclusion showing from various causes why the execution has not been equal to what the authour promised to himself and to the publick.' The first of these things he did to admiration in his *Proposals*; the second he attempts in some parts of his *Preface*. It is plain that he had not been able to do as much as he had hoped by way of restoration and illustration, but it is no less plain that he took pleasure in the accomplished work. Macaulay's statement that 'it would be difficult to name a more slovenly, a more worthless, edition of any great classic', has nothing but emphasis to commend it. Its author was the inventor of that other tedious paradox, that Johnson's mind was a strange composite of giant powers and low prejudices.<sup>1</sup> A wiser man than Macaulay, James Boswell, had already answered Macaulay's condemnation, which is even better answered in Johnson's own words: 'I have endeavoured to perform my task with no slight solicitude. Not a single passage in the whole work has appeared to me corrupt, which I have not attempted to restore; or obscure, which I have not

<sup>1</sup> 'Perhaps the lightness of the matter may conduce to the vehemence of the agency; when the truth to be investigated is so near to inexistence, as to escape attention, its bulk is to be enlarged by rage and exclamation.'—Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare*.

endeavoured to illustrate. In many I have failed like others; and from many, after all my efforts, I have retreated, and confessed the repulse.' Johnson is the most punctiliously truthful of all English writers, and from this statement there is no appeal. If his notes are not so considerable in bulk as those of some of his fellow critics it is because he had not, like Warburton, 'a rage for saying something when there was nothing to be said.' It is true that his knowledge of Elizabethan literature and Elizabethan manners cannot compare with the knowledge of Theobald before him or of Malone after him. It is true also that he undertook no special course of study with a view to his edition. He had read immensely for the *Dictionary*, but the knowledge of the English language which he had thus acquired was not always serviceable for a different purpose. In some respects it was even a hindrance. Johnson's *Dictionary* was intended primarily to furnish a standard of polite usage, suitable for the classic ideals of the new age. He was therefore obliged to forego the use of the lesser Elizabethans, whose authority no one acknowledged, and whose freedom and extravagance were enemies to his purpose. But for all this, and even in the explanation of archaic modes of expression, he can hold his own with the best of his rivals and successors. Most of the really difficult passages in Shakespeare are obscure not from the rarity of the words employed, but from the confused and rapid syntax. Johnson's strong grasp of the main thread of the discourse, his sound sense, and his wide knowledge of humanity, enable him, in a hundred passages, to go straight to Shakespeare's meaning, while the philological

and antiquarian commentators kill one another in the dark, or bury all dramatic life under the far-fetched spoils of their learning. A reader of the new Variorum edition of Shakespeare soon falls into the habit, when he meets with an obscure passage, of consulting Johnson's note before the others. Whole pages of complicated dialectic and minute controversy are often rendered useless by the few brief sentences which recall the reader's attention to the main drift, or remind him of some perfectly obvious circumstance.

It must not be forgotten that Johnson was, after all, a master of the English language. He was not an Elizabethan specialist, but his brief account of the principal causes of Shakespeare's obscurities has never been bettered. Some of these obscurities are due to the surreptitious and careless manner of publication; some to the shifting fashions, and experimental licence of Elizabethan English. In a few terse sentences Johnson adds an account of those other obscurities which belong to the man rather than to the age. 'If Shakespeare has difficulties above other writers, it is to be imputed to the nature of his work, which required the use of common colloquial language, and consequently admitted many phrases allusive, elliptical and proverbial; . . . to which might be added the fullness of idea, which might sometimes load his words with more sentiment than they could conveniently carry, and that rapidity of imagination which might hurry him to a second thought before he had fully explained the first. But my opinion is, that very few of his lines were difficult to his audience, and that he used such expressions as were then common, though the paucity of

contemporary writers makes them now seem peculiar.' Let this be compared with what Coleridge, nearly eighty years later, has to say on the same question: 'Shakespeare is of no age. It is idle to endeavour to support his phrases by quotations from Ben Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, &c. His language is entirely his own, and the younger dramatists imitated him. . . . I believe Shakespeare was not a whit more intelligible in his own day than he is now to an educated man, except for a few local allusions of no consequence.' In so far as Coleridge seems to allude to Shakespeare's very characteristic style, his remarks are true. In so far as he is speaking of the wider problem of language, the verdict of modern Shakespearian scholars is wholly on Johnson's side.

These extracts from two great critics are here compared because they show that Johnson's work on Shakespeare has not been superseded. He has been neglected and depreciated ever since the nineteenth century brought in the new aesthetic and philosophical criticism. The twentieth century, it seems likely, will treat him more respectfully. The romantic attitude begins to be fatiguing. The great romantic critics, when they are writing at their best, do succeed in communicating to the reader those thrills of wonder and exaltation which they have felt in contact with Shakespeare's imaginative work. This is not a little thing to do; but it cannot be done continuously, and it has furnished the workaday critic with a vicious model. There is a taint of insincerity about romantic criticism, from which not even the great romantics are free. They are never in danger from the pitfalls that waylay the plodding critic;



but they are always falling upward, as it were, into vacuity. They love to lose themselves in an *O altitudo*. From the most worthless material they will fashion a new hasty altar to the unknown God. When they are inspired by their divinity they say wonderful things; when the inspiration fails them their language is maintained at the same height, and they say more than they feel. You can never be sure of them.

Those who approach the study of Shakespeare under the sober and vigorous guidance of Johnson will meet with fewer exciting adventures, but they will not see less of the subject. They will hear the greatness of Shakespeare discussed in language so quiet and modest as to sound tame in ears accustomed to hyperbole, but they will not, unless they are very dull or very careless, fall into the error of supposing that Johnson's admiration for Shakespeare was cold or partial. 'This therefore is the praise of Shakespeare, that his drama is the mirrour of life; that he who has mazed his imagination, in following the phantoms which other writers raise up before him, may here be cured of his delirious extasies, by reading human sentiments in human language, by scenes from which a hermit may estimate the transactions of the world, and a confessor predict the progress of the passions.' The great moments of Shakespeare's drama had thrilled and excited Johnson from his boyhood up. When he was nine years old, and was reading *Hamlet* alone in his father's kitchen, the ghost scene made him hurry upstairs to the street door, that he might see people about him, and be saved from the terrors of imagination. Perhaps he remembered this early experience

when he wrote, in his notes on *Macbeth*—‘He that peruses Shakespeare looks round alarmed, and starts to find himself alone.’ In his mature age he could not bear to read the closing scenes of *King Lear* and *Othello*. His notes on some of Shakespeare’s minor characters, as, for instance, his delightful little biographical comment on the words ‘Exit Pistol’, in *King Henry V*, show with what keenness of zest he followed the incidents of the drama and with what sympathy he estimated the persons.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to find a meaning for those who assert that Johnson was insensible to what he himself called ‘the transcendent and unbounded genius’ of Shakespeare.

His Preface was not altogether pleasing to idolaters of Shakespeare even in his own age. It was virulently attacked, and although he published no reply, his defence of himself is expressed in a letter to Charles Burney. ‘We must confess the faults of our favourite,’ he says, ‘to gain credit to our praise of his excellencies. He that claims, either in himself or for another, the honours of perfection, will surely injure the reputation which he designs to assist.’ The head and front of Johnson’s offending was that he wrote and spoke of Shakespeare as one man may fitly speak of another. He claimed for himself the citizenship of that republic

<sup>1</sup> ‘The comick scenes of the history of *Henry* the fourth and fifth are now at an end, and all the comick personages are now dismissed. *Falstaff* and Mrs. *Quickly* are dead; *Nym* and *Bardolph* are hanged; *Gadshill* was lost immediately after the robbery; *Poins* and *Peto* have vanished since, one knows not how; and *Pistol* is now beaten into obscurity. I believe every reader regrets their departure.’

in which Shakespeare is admittedly pre-eminent ; and dared to enumerate Shakespeare's faults. The whole tale of these, as they are catalogued by Johnson, might be ranged under two heads—carelessness, and excess of conceit. It would be foolish to deny these charges : the only possible reply to them is that Shakespeare's faults are never defects ; they belong to superabundant power—power not putting forth its full resources even in the crisis of events ; or power neglecting the task in hand to amuse itself with irresponsible display. The faults are of a piece with the virtues ; and Johnson as good as admits this when he says that they are 'sufficient to obscure and overwhelm any other merit'. None but Shakespeare, that is to say, could move easily and triumphantly under the weight of Shakespeare's faults. The detailed analysis of the faults is a fine piece of criticism, and has never been seriously challenged.

A deep-lying cause, not very easy to explain, which has interfered with the modern appreciation of Johnson, is to be found in the difference between the criticism of his day and the criticism which is now addressed to a large and ignorant audience. He assumed in his public a fair measure of knowledge and judgement ; he ventured to take many things for granted, and to discuss knotty points as a man might discuss them in the society of his friends and equals. He was not always successful in his assumptions, and more than once had to complain of the stupidity which imagined him to deny the truths that he honoured with silence. When he quoted the description of the temple, in Congreve's *Mourning Bride*, as being superior in its kind to any-

thing in Shakespeare, he encountered a storm of protest, the echoes of which persist to this day. His answer to Garrick's objections deserves a wider application: 'Sir, this is not comparing Congreve on the whole with Shakespeare on the whole; but only maintaining that Congreve has one finer passage than any that can be found in Shakespeare. Sir, a man may have no more than ten guineas in the world, but he may have those ten guineas in one piece; and so may have a finer piece than a man who has ten thousand pounds: but then he has only one ten-guinea piece. What I mean is, that you can shew me no passage where there is simply a description of material objects, without any intermixture of moral notions, which produces such an effect.' A few days later, in conversation with Boswell, he again talked of the passage in Congreve, and said, 'Shakespeare never has six lines together without a fault. Perhaps you may find seven, but this does not refute my general assertion. If I come to an orchard, and say there's no fruit here, and then comes a poring man, who finds two apples and three pears, and tells me, "Sir, you are mistaken, I have found both apples and pears," I should laugh at him: what would that be to the purpose?' Johnson is not attacking Shakespeare; he is assuming his greatness, and helping to define it by combating popular follies. He knew well that Shakespeare towers above the greatest writers of the correct school. 'Corneille is to Shakespeare,' he once said, 'as a clipped hedge is to a forest.' But he had small patience with the critics who would have everything for their idol, and who claimed for the forest all the symmetry and neatness of the hedge.

‘These fellows,’ he said, ‘know not how to blame, nor how to commend.’

In these and such-like passages we hear Johnson talking in language suitable enough for a literary club. There is nothing sectarian about his praise; he speaks as an independent man of letters, and will not consent to be sealed of the tribe of Shakespeare. Modern criticism is seldom so free and intimate; it has more the tone of public exposition and laudation; it seeks to win souls to Shakespeare’s poetry, and, for fear of misunderstanding, avoids the mention of his faults. It is always willing to suppose that Shakespeare had good and sufficient reason for what he wrote, and seldom permits itself the temerity of Johnson, who points out, for instance, what decency and probability require in the closing act of *All’s Well that Ends Well*, and adds: ‘Of all this Shakespeare could not be ignorant, but Shakespeare wanted to conclude his play.’

It would not be difficult to show that much new light has been thrown on parts of Shakespeare’s work by the more reverential treatment. Yet perhaps it has obscured as much as it has elucidated. So fixed a habit of appreciation is the death of individuality and taste. Discipleship is a necessary stage in the study of any great poet; it is not a necessary qualification of the mature critic. The acclamation of his following is not so honourable a tribute to a prize-fighter as the respect of his antagonist. In a certain sense Johnson was antagonistic to Shakespeare. His own taste in tragedy may be learned from his note on the scene between Queen Katherine and her attendants at the



close of Act IV of *Henry VIII*: 'This scene is, above any other part of Shakespeare's tragedies, and perhaps above any scene of any other poet, tender and pathetick, without gods, or furies, or poisons, or precipices, without the help of romantick circumstances, without improbable sallies of poetical lamentation, and without any throes of tumultuous misery.' But although this describes the kind of drama that Johnson preferred, he can praise, in words that have become a commonplace of criticism, the wildness of romance in *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and can enumerate and admire the 'touches of Judgement and genius' which add horror to the incantation of the witches in *Macbeth*. Like all great critics, he can understand the excellences of opposite kinds. Indeed, in his defence of Shakespeare's neglect of the unities he passes over to the side of the enemy, and almost becomes a romantic.<sup>1</sup>

The history of Shakespeare criticism would be shorter than it is if Johnson's views on the emendation of the text had been more extensively adopted. 'It has been my settled principle,' he says, 'that the reading of the ancient books is probably true, and therefore is not to be disturbed for the sake of elegance, perspicuity, or mere improvements of the sense. . . . As I practised conjecture more, I learned to trust it less ;

<sup>1</sup> The transformation was completed after his death. I am indebted to Mr. W. P. Ker for pointing out to me that Henri Beyle in his *Racine et Shakespeare* (1822) translates all that Johnson says on the unities, and appropriates it as the manifesto of the young romantics. 'But he told not them that he had taken the honey out of the carcase of the lion.'

and after I had printed a few plays, resolved to insert none of my own readings in the text. Upon this caution I now congratulate myself, for every day increases my doubt of my emendations.' A good part of his work on the text consisted in restoring the original readings in place of the plausible conjectures of Pope and Warburton. Yet he sometimes pays to their readings a respect which he would not challenge for his own, and retains them in the text. He adopts Warburton's famous reading in the speech of Hamlet to Polonius:—'If the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god kissing carrion'—and remarks on it, 'This is a noble emendation, which almost sets the critick on a level with the authour.' Admiration for Warburton's ingenuity caused him to break his own rule, which is sound, and should never be broken. The original reading—'a good kissing carrion'—has a meaning; and therefore, on Johnson's principle should stand. Its meaning, moreover, is better suited to Hamlet and to Shakespeare than the elaborate mythological argument implied in Warburton's emendation. If the 'good kissing carrion' be understood by the common analogy of 'good drinking water' or 'good eating apples', the grimness of the thought exactly falls in with Hamlet's utter disaffection to humanity. 'Conception is a blessing, but not as your daughter may conceive.' To bring the amended reading into relation with Hamlet's thought Warburton is compelled to write a most elaborate disquisition; and Johnson might have remembered and applied his own warning: 'I have always suspected that the reading is right, which requires many words to prove it wrong; and the

emendation wrong, that cannot without so much labour appear to be right.'

Johnson's treatment of his predecessors and rivals is uniformly generous; he never attempts to raise his own credit on their mistakes and extravagance. Once, when a lady at Miss Hannah More's house talked of his preface to Shakespeare as superior to Pope's: 'I fear not, Madam,' said he, 'the little fellow has done wonders.' Hammer he speaks of as 'a man, in my opinion, eminently qualified by nature for such studies'. Warburton was fated to suffer at his hands more than any other commentator, but it is plain from the Preface that he had a grateful remembrance of Warburton's kindness to the early *Observations on Macbeth*. 'He praised me,' Johnson once said, 'at a time when praise was of value to me.' Such praise Johnson never forgot; but he did not allow it to bias his work as a critic. It may be said that he unduly exalts Warburton at the expense of Theobald ('O, Sir, he'd make two-and-fifty Theobalds, cut into slices'), but it was not only personal gratitude which dictated that judgement. Theobald was, without doubt, a better scholar and a better editor than Warburton: there can be no question which of the two has done more for the text of Shakespeare. But Warburton was a man of large general powers, who wrote an easy and engaging style. His long, fantastic, unnecessary notes on Shakespeare are, almost without exception, good reading; which is more than can be said of Theobald's. Johnson's regard for the dignity of letters made him too severe on one who was destitute of the literary graces. Modern opinion has reinstated Theobald, and is inclined to adopt Foote's, rather than

Johnson's, opinion of Warburton. When Foote visited Eton, the boys came round him in the college quadrangle. 'Tell us, Mr. Foote,' said the leader, 'the best thing you ever said.' 'Why,' said Foote, 'I once saw a little blackguard imp of a chimney-sweeper, mounted on a noble steed, prancing and curvetting in all the pride and magnificence of nature,—There, said I, goes Warburton upon Shakespeare.'

Johnson himself would not have been ready to allow any weight to the critical opinions of stage-players. One of his heterodox opinions, says Boswell, was a contempt for tragic acting. In *The Idler* he describes the Indian war-cry, and continues: 'I am of opinion that by a proper mixture of asses, bulls, turkeys, geese, and tragedians a noise might be procured equally horrid with the war-cry.' He was more than once reproached by Boswell for omitting all mention of Garrick in the Preface to Shakespeare, but he was not to be moved. 'Has Garrick not brought Shakespeare into notice?' asked Boswell. 'Sir,' said Johnson, 'to allow that would be to lampoon the age. Many of Shakespeare's plays are the worse for being acted: *Macbeth*, for instance.' This was the belief also of Charles Lamb, who expounded it in his essay *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare*. 'There is something in the nature of acting,' he concludes, 'which levels all distinctions. . . . Did not Garrick shine, and was he not ambitious of shining in every drawling tragedy that his wretched day produced—the productions of the Hills and the Murphys and the Browns—and shall he have the honour to dwell in our minds for ever as an inseparable concomitant with Shakespeare? A kindred mind!' It is a strange kind

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of heresy that is the fixed belief of two such critics as Johnson and Lamb.

But let it be a heresy ; one of the chief fascinations of Johnson's notes on Shakespeare is that they introduce us to not a few of his private heretical opinions, and record some of his most casual reminiscences. We are enabled to trace his reading in the *Life of Sir Thomas More*, and in Sir Walter Raleigh's political remains, and in the fashionable guide to conversation translated from the French of Scudery. We learn some things which Boswell does not tell us ; some even (if a bold thought may be indulged) which Boswell did not know. We are introduced in the *Life* to Johnson's cat Hodge, for whom Johnson used to go out and buy oysters, lest the servants having that trouble should take a dislike to the poor creature. But we are not told, what is proved by a note on *Cymbeline*, that Johnson passionately protested against physiological experiments on live animals.<sup>1</sup> Again, is it not certain that Boswell, if he had known it, would have told us that his hero wore his boots indifferently, either on either foot, and further, which is yet a stranger thing,

<sup>1</sup> Act I, Scene vii (l. v. 18-24) :

'QUEEN.

*I will try the forces*

*Of these thy compounds on such creatures as*

*We count not worth the hanging, but none human, . .*

CORNELIUS.

*Your Highness*

*Shall from this practice but make hard your heart.*

There is in this passage nothing that much requires a note, yet I cannot forbear to push it forward into observation. The thought would probably have been more amplified, had our authour lived to be shocked with such experiments as have been published in later times, by a race of men that have practised tortures without pity, and related them without shame, and are yet suffered to erect their heads among human beings.

*Cape saxa manu, cape robora, pastor.'*



believed that all other boot-wearers practise the same impartiality? Boswell can hardly have known this; yet Johnson's note on the tailor in *King John*, who, in his haste, falsely thrusts his slippers upon contrary feet, leaves no room for doubt. 'Shakespeare,' says Johnson, 'seems to have confounded a man's shoes with his gloves. He that is frightened or hurried may put his hand into the wrong glove, but either shoe will equally admit either foot. The authour seems to be disturbed by the disorder which he describes.' This is a topic which demands, and would well repay, the expert labours of academic research. Very little is known about Johnson's boots.

A great part of an editor's work is in its nature perishable. Some of his notes are in time superseded; some are shown to be wrong; some are accepted and embodied in the common stock of knowledge. Of all Johnson's annotations on Shakespeare those which record his own tastes and habits have preserved most of freshness and interest. It is a privilege to be able to hear him talking without the intervention of Boswell; we can in some ways come closer to him when that eager presence is removed. It is the greatness of Boswell's achievement that he has made Johnson familiar to us; but the very zeal and reverence of the biographer inevitably infect the reader, who is admitted to the intimacies of a man of companionable genius as if to a shrine. Boswell made of biography a passionate science; and viewed his hero in a detached light. Nothing hurt him so much as the implication that any single detail or remark of his recording was inaccurately or carelessly set down. His self-abnegation is complete; where he permits himself to appear it is only that he may exhibit his subject to

greater advantage. He invented the experimental method, and applied it to the determination of human character. At great expenditure of time and forethought he brought Johnson into strange company, the better to display his character and behaviour. He plied him with absurd questions, in the hope of receiving valuable answers. All this was not the conduct of a friend, but of a remorseless investigator. And when to this is added Boswell's spirit of humble adoration, it is easy to understand how the whole process has made Johnson clear indeed in every outline, but a little too remote. His eccentricities take up too much of the picture, so that to the vulgar intelligence he has always seemed something of a monster. Even those who love Johnson fall too easily into Boswell's attitude, and observe, and listen, and wonder. It is good to remember that the dictator, when he was in a happy vein, was, above most men, sensible, courteous and friendly. The best of his notes on Shakespeare, like the best of his spoken remarks, invite discussion and quicken thought. What a conversation might have been started at the club by his brief observation on Gaunt's speech in *Richard II*:

Shorten my days thou canst with sullen sorrow,  
And pluck nights from me, but not lend a morrow.

'It is matter of very melancholy consideration,' says Johnson, 'that all human advantages confer more power of doing evil than good.' No doubt the reflection is highly characteristic of its author, but we are too much accustomed to let our interest in the character overshadow our interest in the truth. Johnson's talk was free from self-consciousness; but Boswell, when he was in the room, was conscious of one person only, so that

a kind of self-consciousness by proxy is the impression conveyed. There is no greater enemy to the freedom and delight of social intercourse than the man who is always going back on what has just been said, to praise its cleverness, to guess its motive, or to show how it illustrates the character of the speaker. Boswell was not, of course, guilty of this particular kind of ill-breeding ; but the very necessities of his record produce something of a like effect. The reader who desires to have Johnson to himself for an hour, with no interpreter, cannot do better than turn to the notes on Shakespeare. They are written informally and fluently ; they are packed full of observation and wisdom ; and their only fault is that they are all too few.

## V

### EARLY LIVES OF THE POETS

A STUDENT of history, who has to contend every day with the scarcity and inaccuracy of human records, finds himself forced to admit that men are wise, and care little for fame. Each generation of men goes about its business and its pleasure with immense energy and zest ; each, when it has passed away, leaves the historians of a later era to spell out what they can from a few broken stones and documents preserved by chance. The opinion of Shakespeare, that

Nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence  
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence,

is the opinion of the sane world ; and the desire for posthumous fame, 'that last infirmity of noble mind,' is a rare infirmity. The Romans were content to bequeath to us their blood and their law. If every human creature were provided with some separate and permanent memorial, we could not walk in the fields for tombstones.

I desire in this paper to trace the late and gradual growth of an interest in the Lives of English Authors, and to give some brief account of the earlier collections of printed biographies. Biography is not the least valuable part of modern literary history, and its origin is to be found in the new conceptions of literature and of history which were introduced at the time of the Renaissance. In the Middle Ages a writer was wholly

identified with his work. His personal habits and private vicissitudes of fortune excited little curiosity; Vincent of Beauvais and Godfrey of Viterbo are the names not so much of two men as of two books. Literature was regarded as the chief means of preserving and promulgating ancient truths and traditions; and authors were mechanical scribes, recorders, and compilers. The distinction between fact and fiction, which we all make to-day with so airy a confidence, was hardly known to the mediaeval writer. Even the bard who celebrated the exploits of Arthur, the Christian king, or of Fierabras, the Pagan giant, based his claim to credit on the historical truth of his narrative, and supported himself by the authority of the books from which he copied. Poet or historian, he would have been indignant to be refused the name of copyist. Whence should he derive his wisdom but from the old books whose lessons he desired to hand on to coming generations?—

For out of oldè feldès, as men seith,  
Cometh al this newè corn from yeer to yere;  
And out of oldè bokès, in good feith,  
Cometh al this newè science that men lere.

While this was the dominant conception of art and of science, of history and of literature, authors were, in every sense of the word, a humble class. Where it was their function to instruct, they were conduit-pipes for the wisdom of the ages; where they set themselves to amuse, they held a rank not far above that of the professional jesters and minstrels who were attached as servitors to the household of some great lord or king.

With the revival of letters in the Sixteenth Century



there came the first serious attempt to put on record such facts as could be recovered concerning the great writers who had flourished in these islands. The dissolution of the monasteries caused the destruction of so large a mass of valuable material that it was impossible for scholars to stand by without making an effort to save some remnants. Leland, Bale, and Pits, whose joint activity covers the whole of the Sixteenth Century, each of them made a collection of the lives and works of the writers of Great Britain. Three of the most conspicuous features of later antiquarian learning are exemplified in their work, as it is estimated by Fuller: '*J. Leland*,' he says, 'is the industrious *bee*, working all: *J. Bale* is the angry *wasp*, stinging all: *J. Pits* is the idle *drone*, stealing all.' But these three men made no new departure in method. The bulk of the writers whom they commemorated were monks and friars, concerning whom biographical details were wholly to seek. Their works, which were compounded, with large additions, into a single folio volume by Bishop Tanner, can hardly be said to exhibit the faint beginnings of modern biography.

It is difficult to persuade man that his contemporaries are valuable and important persons. The industrious scholar bars his doors and windows, and shuts himself up in his room, that he may bequeath to future ages his views on the Primitive Church or the Egyptian Dynasties. His works, too often, go to swell the dust-heap of learning. And what is passing in the street, on the other side of his shutter, is what future ages will probably desire, and desire in vain, to know. At the time of the Renaissance, when writers of knowledge and power were Latinists and scholars, who

had been nurtured in an almost superstitious veneration for the ancient classics, the poor playwright or poet in the vernacular tongue was little likely to engage the labours of a learned pen. Those Elizabethan authors whose lives are fairly well known to us were always something other than mere authors—men of noble family, it may be, or distinguished in politics and war. We know more of Sir Walter Raleigh's career than of Shakespeare's, and more of Essex than of Spenser. On the other hand, while the works of Shakespeare and Spenser have come down to us almost intact, most of the poems of Raleigh and Essex are lost. Men of position held professional authorship in some contempt, and wrote only for the delectation of their private friends. And when Sir Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke, wrote a brief life of his friend and ancient schoolfellow, Sir Philip Sidney, it was not the author of the *Arcadia* or the *Sonnets* that he desired to celebrate, but rather the statesman of brilliant promise and the soldier whose death had put a nation into mourning. So that this ceremonial little treatise, which is the earliest notable English life of an English poet, is the life of a poet almost by accident.

With the Seventeenth Century, a century rich in all antiquarian and historical learning, literary biography begins. Early in the century, Thomas Heywood, the dramatist, planned a volume to contain 'the lives of all the poets, foreign and modern, from the first before Homer to the *novissimi* and last'. He never carried out his scheme, and so we have lost an invaluable work. But his other prose works and compilations give us reason to fear that his *Lives* would have been borrowed almost wholly from books and would have

contained all too little of direct impression or reminiscence. The scheme for a complete account of the lives of English poets was not taken up again till towards the close of the century, and then Shakespeare and the Elizabethans were beyond the reach of living memory.

Nevertheless, during the course of the century poets began to find biographers. The patriotic impulse that had produced the Elizabethan Chronicles, and Camden's *Britannia*, and Drayton's *Polyolbion* moved Thomas Fuller to write his *History of the Worthies of England* (1662), which included the lives of many poets. In undertaking this work Fuller proposed to himself five ends—'first, to give some glory to God; secondly, to preserve the memories of the dead; thirdly, to present examples to the living; fourthly, to entertain the reader with delight; and lastly (which I am not ashamed publicly to profess) to procure some honest profit to myself.' He died a year before his book appeared, so he failed in the last of his aims. He did his best to make his subject attractive to readers. 'I confess,' he says, 'the subject is but dull in itself, to tell the time and place of men's birth, and deaths, their names, with the names and number of their books; and therefore this bare skeleton of time, place, and person must be fleshed with some pleasant passages. To this intent I have purposely interlaced . . . many delightful stories.' He will always be valued for the facts that he records and for the many surprising turns of fanciful wit with which he relieves the monotony of his work. In endeavouring to make his biographies literary he had the advantage of a matchless model. For before Fuller wrote, Izaak Walton had produced two of his famous

*Lives.* Walton was drawn into the writing of biography by his desire to leave the world some memorial of the virtues of men whom he had known. The men whom he chose for his subject were men like-minded with himself, men who had studied to be quiet, 'to keep themselves in peace and privacy, and behold God's blessing spring out of their mother earth.' The Life of Dr. John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's, the first that he wrote, was contributed as preface to a collection of Donne's sermons in 1640. Sir Henry Wotton, whose Life appeared in 1651, had been Walton's friend and fellow angler during the quiet years that he spent at Eton College after his retirement from the service of the State—the College being to his mind as a quiet harbour to a seafaring man after a tempestuous voyage. . . . Nor did he forget his innate pleasure of angling' (for an angler, according to Walton, is born, not made), 'which he would usually call "his idle time not idly spent"; saying often, he would rather live five May months than forty Decembers.' To these two lives Walton subsequently added three more, the Lives of Mr. Richard Hooker, Mr. George Herbert, and Dr. Robert Sanderson, the last being written almost forty years later than the Life of Donne. Walton had not known all these men, though they were all contemporary with his long life. But he was drawn by natural sympathy to their characters, and his portraits of them are masterpieces of delicate insight.

Indeed, Walton's *Lives* are almost too perfect to serve as models. They are obituary poems; each of them has the unity and the melody of a song or a sonnet; they deal with no problems, but sing the praises of obscure beneficence and a mind that seeks its

happiness in the shade. No English writer before Walton had so skilfully illustrated men's natural disposition and manners from the most casual acts and circumstances. It is not in the crisis of great events that he paints his heroes, but in their most retired contemplations and the ordinary round of their daily life. We see Hooker as he was found by his pupils at Drayton Beauchamp tending his small allotment of sheep in a common field, with the *Odes* of Horace in his hands, and hear him called away by the voice of his wife to rock the cradle; we find George Herbert tolling the bell and serving at the altar of his little church at Bemerton, and overhear his conversations with his parishioners by the roadside; we come upon Dr. Sanderson, a man whose only infirmities were that he was too timorous and bashful, as Walton met him in the bookseller's quarter of Little Britain, where he had been to buy a book; we notice that he is dressed 'in sad-coloured clothes, and, God knows, far from being costly'; and, on the sudden coming-on of a shower of rain, we are allowed to accompany him and his biographer to 'a cleanly house', where they have bread, cheese, ale, and a fire for their money, and where we are permitted to overhear their talk on the troubles of the times. Or we see Dr. John Donne dressed in his winding sheet, with his face exposed and his eyes shut, standing for his picture in his study, that so his portrait when it was finished might serve to keep him in mind of his death. All these sketches and many more in Walton's *Lives* are as perfect, in their way, as the *Idylls* of Theocritus.

Intimate biography of this kind was the creation of the Seventeenth Century, and Walton had many fol-



lowers and disciples. Some of the formal collections of Lives are little better, it is true, than compilations of dry facts and dates. The *Theatrum Poetarum Anglicanorum* (1675) by Milton's nephew, Edward Phillips; the *Lives of the Most Famous English Poets* (1687) by William Winstanley, an industrious barber, who stole from Phillips as Phillips had stolen from Fuller; the *Account of the English Dramatic Poets* (1691) by Gerard Langbaine; Sir Thomas Pope Blount's *De Re Poetica, or Remarks upon Poetry, with Characters and Censures of the most considerable Poets* (1694)—all these are valuable as authorities, but they draw no portraits of authors in their habit as they lived, and intrude upon no privacy. Even where the material for a familiar and life-like portrait existed it was too often suppressed in the supposed interests of the dignity of literature. Sprat in his *Life of Cowley* (1668) confesses that he had a large collection of Cowley's letters to his private friends, in which were expressed 'the Native tenderness and Innocent gayety of his Mind'. But 'nothing of this nature', says Sprat, 'should be published. . . . In such Letters the Souls of Men should appear undress'd: And in that negligent habit, they may be fit to be seen by one or two in a Chamber, but not to go abroad into the Streets.' So we have lost the letters of a man whom we can easily believe to have been the best letter-writer of his century and country.

Nevertheless, some familiar details have escaped suppression; not all the literary portraits of the time are conventional and stiff. Edward Phillips' *Life of John Milton* (1694), prefixed to an edition of Milton's Latin letters, preserves for us some minute and personal reminiscences of the poet. Moreover, the Seventeenth

Century is rich in religious biography, written with a homiletic and didactic intent. The *Lives of Eminent Persons* (1683) by Samuel Clarke, although, like the mediaeval Lives of Saints, they are too monotonously alike, too little quickened with the caprices and humours of the unregenerate, yet occasionally display, in the interstices between Biblical quotation and edifying sentiment, real glimpses of living human character. We are told, for instance, of Mr. Richard Blackerby, that 'he was exceeding careful to have none of Gods Creatures lost; he would always have a Fowl or two allowed to come familiarly into his Eating Room, to pick up the lesser Crumbs that would fall from the Table'. But evangelical biography, which attempts to exhibit human life as a design nearly resembling a fixed pattern, has never been strong in portrait-painting. These sketches are seen to be merely childish in conception and execution if they be set beside the vivid and masterly work of John Aubrey, the best of seventeenth-century gossips. He was despised by his learned contemporaries for an idle man of fashion and a pretender to antiquities. Anthony à Wood, the author of that great work the *Athenae Oxonienses*—perhaps the most valuable of all early biographical collections—speaks of Aubrey as 'a shiftless person, roving and magotieheaded, and sometimes little better than crased'. Yet Aubrey had the true spirit of an antiquary; nothing was too trivial to be set down in his *Brief Lives*. He records how, walking through Newgate Street, he saw a bust of the famous Dame Venetia Stanley in a brasier's shop, with the gilding on it destroyed by the Great Fire of London, and regrets that he could never see the bust again, for 'they melted it down'. 'How these curiosi-

ties,' he adds, 'would be quite forgott, did not such idle fellowes as I am putt them downe!'

We owe to Aubrey a world of anecdote that but for his idleness would have been lost. He has the quickest eye for the odd humours and tricks of thought and gesture which distinguish one man from another. He was credulous, no doubt, for he was insatiably inquisitive, and the possibilities of human nature seemed to him to be inexhaustible. Character is what he loves, and he found the characters of men to be full of novelties and surprises. To him we owe the portrait of Hobbes the philosopher, at the age of ninety, lying in bed, and, when he was sure that the doors were barred and nobody heard him (for he had not a good voice), singing from a printed book of airs, to strengthen his lungs and prolong his life. Again, he tells how Thomas Fuller, the historian, had a memory so good that 'he would repeate to you forwards and backwards all the signes from Ludgate to Charing Crosse'. Or how Sir John Suckling, the poet, when he was at his lowest ebb in gaming, 'would make himselfe most glorious in apparell, and sayd that it exalted his spirits.' Or how William Prynne, the Puritan chastiser of the theatre, studied after this manner: 'He wore a long quilt cap, which came 2 or 3, at least, inches over his eies, which served him as an umbrella to defend his eies from the light. About every 3 houres his man was to bring him a roll and a pott of ale to refocillate his wasted spirits. So he studied and dranke and munched some bread: and this maintained him till night; and then he made a good supper.' Sometimes it is a witty saying or happy retort that sticks in Aubrey's memory. So he relates of Sir Henry Savile, Provost of Eton,

that he could not abide *Wits*; 'when a young scholar was recommended to him for a good witt, *Out upon him*, says he, *I'll have nothing to do with him; give me the plodding student. If I would look for witts I would goe to Newgate, there be the witts.*' Again, he tells how Sir Walter Raleigh, dining with his graceless son at a nobleman's table, when his son made a profane and immodest speech, struck him over the face. 'His son, as rude as he was, would not strike his father, but strikes over the face the gentleman that sate next to him, and sayd: "Box about: 'twill come to my father anon."'

Aubrey takes as keen a delight as Samuel Pepys himself in the use of his natural senses, and his zest in observation sometimes gives an air of exaggeration to his recorded impressions. Of Sir Henry Savile he says, 'He was an extraordinary handsome and beautiful man; no lady had a finer complexion.' Of Sir William Petty, 'He is a proper handsome man, measured six foot high, good head of browne haire moderately turning up. . . . His eies are a kind of goose-grey, but very short-sighted, and, as to aspect, beautifull, and promise sweetnes of nature, and they do not deceive, for he is a marveillous good-natured person.' Aubrey's unbounded faculty for enjoyment and admiration is seen even in his description of the mechanical contrivances and scientific inventions that were shown to him by his friends. Now it is a new kind of well—'the most ingenious and useful bucket well that ever I saw. . . . 'Tis extremely well worth the seeing.' Or it is a device for relieving those who are troubled with phlegm—'a fine tender sprig,' with a rag tied at the end to put down the throat of the patient. 'I could never make it

goe downe my throat,' says Aubrey, 'but for those that can 'tis a most incomparable engine.' And there is nothing that he takes more delight in than a funeral or an obituary monument. His descriptions of tombstones almost make you feel that it is worth the pains of dying to get so admirable a thing contrived in your honour. Of Selden he says :

He was magnificently buried in the Temple Church. . . . His grave was about ten foot deepe, or better, walled up a good way with bricks, of which also the bottome was paved, but the sides at the bottome for about two foot high were of black polished marble, wherein his coffin (covered with black bayes) lyeth, and upon that wall of marble was presently let downe a huge black marble stone of great thicknesse, with this inscription :

*Heic jacet corpus Johannis Seldeni.*

. . . Over this was turned an inch of brick . . . and upon that was throwne the earth, etc., and on the surface lieth another finer grave-stone of black marble with this inscription :

*I. Seldenus I. C. heic situs est.*

. . . On the side of the wall above is a fine inscription of white marble : the epitaph he made himself.

This is merely one instance of Aubrey's loving care for grave-stones and monuments. He recognized them perhaps as being among the best friends of the antiquary, and desired that they should receive all care and honour. Of Ben Jonson he says :

He lies buried in the north aisle of Westminster Abbey, in the path of square stone (the rest is lozenge) opposite to the scutcheon of Robertus de Ros, with this inscription only on him, in a pavement square, of blew marble, about 14 inches square,

O RARE BEN JOHNSON,

which was donne at the chardge of Jack Young (after-



wards knighted) who, walking there when the grave was covering, gave the fellow eighteenpence to cutt it.

And Aubrey did not forget his own epitaph. Among his papers he left two suggestions, made at different times, for an inscription to be placed on his tomb. 'I would desire,' he says at the foot of one of these, 'that this Inscription sho<sup>d</sup> be a stone of white M<sup>ble</sup> about the bigness of a royal sheet of paper, scilicet about 2 foot square. Mr. Reynolds of Lambeth, Stone-cutter (Fox-hall), who married Mr. Elias Ashmole's widow, will help me to a Marble as square as an imperial sheet of paper for 8 shillings.'

But Aubrey's greatest quality as an antiquary is his sympathy with the living, and with life in all its phases. He writes best when he is recording his memories of men that he had seen and known. Where these men were famous, and remembered by after generations, his vivid phrases have long since been embodied in biographical dictionaries. Some of his best work, however, is done on perishable names, and no better example of his art can be found than his account of Dr. Ralph Kettell, for forty-five years President of Trinity College, Oxford, a humorous pedagogue of the old school, who died soon after Aubrey came into residence at the college :

He dyed a yeare after I came to the Colledge, and he was then a good deale above 80 (quaere aetatem), and he had then a fresh ruddy complexion. He was a very tall well-growne man. His gowne and surplice and hood being on, he had a terrible gigantesque aspect, with his sharp gray eies. . . . He was, they say, white very soon ; he had a very venerable presence, and was an excellent governour. One of his maximes of governing was to keepe down the *juvenilis impetus*. . . . One of the fellows (in Mr. Francis Potter's time) was wont to say

that Dr. Kettel's braine was like a *hasty-pudding* where there was *memorie, judgement, and phancy all stirred together*. If you had to doe with him, taking him for a foole, you would have found in him great subtilty and reach: *è contra*, if you treated with him as a wise man, you would have mistaken him for a foole. . . . He observed that the howses that had the smallest beer had most drunkards, for it forced them to goe into the town to comfort their stomachs: wherefore Dr. Kettle alwayes had in his College excellent beer, not better to be had in Oxon; so that we could not goe to any other place but for the worse, and we had the fewest drunkards of any howse in Oxford. . . . He was irreconcilable to long haire; called them hairy scalpes, and as for periwigges (which were then very rarely worne) he beleevved them to be the scalpes of men cutt off after they were hang'd, and so tanned and dressed for use. When he observed the scholars' haire longer than ordinary (especially if they were scholars of the howse), he would bring a paire of cizers in his muffle (which he commonly wore), and woe be to them that sate on the outside of the table. I remember he cutt Mr. Radford's haire with the knife that chipps the bread on the buttery-hatch. . . . He dragg'd with one (*i. e.* right) foot a little, by which he gave warning (like the rattle-snake) of his coming. . . . He preach't every Sunday at his parsonage at Garsington (about 5 miles off). He rode on his bay gelding, with his boy Ralph before him, with a leg of mutton (commonly) and some colledge bread. He did not care for the country revells, because they tended to debauchery. Sayd he, at Garsington revell, *Here is Hey for Garsington! and Hey Hockly! but here's nobody cries, Hey for God Almighty!* . . . 'Tis probable this venerable Dr. might have lived some yeares longer, and finisht his century, had not those civill wars come on: which much grieved him, that was wont to be absolute in the colledge, to be affronted and disrespected by rude soldiers. . . . His dayes were shortned, and dyed (July) anno Domini 1643, and was buried at Garsington: quære his epitaph.

The abundant human sympathy that takes delight in all these passing incidents and trivial characteristics is

a necessary part of the equipment of an antiquary. The whole tribe of antiquaries suffers under the false imputation that their work is 'dry-as-dust'. No doubt there are minute, exact, and arid minds in that, as in other callings. No doubt there is useful work to be done, here as elsewhere, by men who ply a dull mechanical trade and forswear imagination. But imaginative sympathy is, none the less, the soul of an antiquary, the impulse that urges him on to years of tedious labour, and the refreshment that keeps him alive in a desert of dust and tombs. 'Methinks,' says Aubrey, 'I am carried on by a kind of Oestrus, for nobody else hereabout hardly cares for it, but rather makes a scorn of it. But methinks it shews a kind of gratitude and good nature, to revive the memories and memorials of the pious and charitable Benefactors long since dead and gone.' But if gratitude is the prevailing motive, it is by a wide faculty of imagination that the antiquary comes to understand that there is but one human society on earth, and that, for good or for evil, the living are the least part of it. When other men see only a wave of green rising ground, he calls up in his thought a bygone civilization, he sees the Roman soldiers relieving guard and exchanging gossip on the ramparts of a world-empire, he witnesses excursions and alarums, and hears the strange jargon of the long-haired prisoners brought captive into camp. Where others see only a scrap of brown parchment inscribed with unintelligible characters he reconstructs in thought the mediaeval church and the despotism that it wielded in all the dearest relations of life. He knows that a great institution never perished without leaving a legacy to those that come after it, and that the present is inextricably entangled with the past.

He builds up a vanished society from tiles and buttons, black-jacks, horn books, and battered pewter vessels. Whatever humanity has touched has a story for him. It is not an accident that the greatest novelist of Scotland was first an antiquary. And, to return to my tale, it was only by accident that John Aubrey, with his interest in witchcraft and mechanical science, in astrology and education, in Stonehenge and the Oxford colleges, did not leave some more considerable monument of his powers than the voluminous scattered papers which were published for the most part long after his death.

What antiquaries suffer from the neglect of the public is a small thing compared to what they suffer at the hands of one another. Aubrey's biographical materials were compounded, with worse than no acknowledgement, by Anthony à Wood in his *Athenae Oxonienses, an Exact History of all the Writers and Bishops who have had their Education in the University of Oxford* (1691-2). This great work, as splendid a benefaction as has ever been conferred by a single donor on any University, was conceived and executed by its author out of love for the place where he was born and had his education. Like a disdainful beauty, the University of Oxford has often been careless of those who love and serve her best. Her native fascination keeps her truest lovers her slaves, and leaves her free to bestow her kindness on those who will not swell her following till they are assured of her favour. Anthony à Wood did not grudge a lifetime spent in the service of Oxford, but that he felt her indifference is evident from his preface, *To the Reader*:

The Reader is desired to know that this Herculean labour had been more proper for a head or fellow of

a college, or for a public professor or officer of the most noble university of Oxford to have undertaken and consummated, than the author, who never enjoyed any place or office therein, or can justly say that he hath eaten the bread of any founder. Also, that it had been a great deal more fit for one who pretends to be a *virtuoso*, and to know all men, and all things that are transacted; Or for one who frequents much society in common-rooms, at public fires, in coffee-houses, assignations, clubbs, etc., where the characters of men and their works are frequently discussed; but the author, alas, is so far from frequenting such company and topicks, that he is as 'twere dead to the world, and utterly unknown in person to the generality of Scholars in Oxon.

One reason why the company of Anthony was not agreeable to the fellows even of his own college is not unconnected with his professional excellence. 'I am told,' says Hearne, 'by one of the fellows of Merton College that Mr. Ant. à Wood formerly used to frequent their common-room; but that a quarrel arising one night between some of the fellows, one of them, who thought himself very much abused, put some of the rest of them into the court; but when the day for deciding the matter came, there wanted sufficient evidence. At last Mr. Wood, having been in company all the time the quarrel lasted, and put down the whole in writing, gave a full relation, which appeared so clear for the plaintiff, that immediate satisfaction was commanded to be given. This was so much resented, that Mr. Wood was afterwards expelled the common-room, and his company avoided, as an observing person, and not fit to be present where matters of moment were discussed.' In his autobiography Wood himself relates how it was said that 'the society of Merton would not let me live in the college for fear I should pluck it down to search after antiquities'.



But no one can read the *Athenae Oxonienses* without recognizing that the author was also a man of a naturally satirical wit, with a great talent for sketching the characters of men or books in a scornful phrase, or a few incisive epithets. His depreciation is the more effective in that it falls at random, with none of the air of a studied invective. He knows that the indifference of contempt, which is professed a hundred times in human society for once that it is really felt, may be better and more bitingly conveyed in a subordinate clause than in the main sentence. So in speaking of the music of his time, he says, 'Mr. Davis Mell was accounted hitherto the best for the violin in England, as I have before told you ; but after Baltzar came into England, and showed his most wonderful parts on that instrument, Mell was not so admired ; yet he played sweeter, was a well-bred gentleman, and not given to excessive drinking as Baltzar was.' So Mell loses his musical pre-eminence, and Baltzar his reputation for courtesy and sobriety.

If we consider, therefore, the enormous learning of Anthony à Wood, in a kind for which the Oxford of his day had little sympathy, his love of a solitary and retired life, his liberty of speech, his quickness of observation, even when 'he seemed to take notice of nothing and to know nothing', his independent pride and sarcastic severity of judgement, we shall find no reason to wonder that the fellows of Merton, solicitous chiefly, it may be, for the dignity and comfort of the high table, were not sorry to be rid of his company.

About the greatness of his achievement there can be no question. His account of the learned writers and poets who had their education at Oxford has been used by a hundred later compilers ; it has been edited with

additions, and may be so edited again and again ; but it can never be wholly superseded. The *Athenae* is a monument of literature ; it records in its thousands of columns all that Oxford meant to the world, all of learning and beauty that she gave to the world, during centuries of her existence ; and its author might justly boast, in the words of the poet-painter who drew the portrait of his mistress—

Let all men note  
That in all time (O Love, thy gift is this !)  
He that would look on her must come to me.

The subject is large, and a brief mention of some later compilations must suffice. Aubrey and Wood had appealed chiefly to an audience of professed students and lovers of antiquity. But at the beginning of the Eighteenth Century, the public, having enjoyed such an education as is obtainable in the noisy school of political and religious controversy, began to ask for books. This was the genesis of the publisher. Before this date the author said what he had to say, and the bookseller introduced it to such readers as were likely to appreciate it. Then, as now, an author often failed to find a bookseller or printer who would be at the risk of printing his work. But while the bookseller reigned, the chain of causation often began with the author, who was a man writing, and writing, it might even be, because he thought or knew. When the publisher succeeded to power, the order was reversed. The main fact to be recognized by him was that here was a public which had already taken to reading, as a man may take to drink. The public must be supplied with something that it could consume in large quantities without loss of appetite. Hence the novel, the review, the periodical essay, the collection of

private letters, and though last, not least, the intimate lives of notable men. Tonson, the first great publisher, deserves to be named with Copernicus, Harvey, Kepler, James Watt, and other famous discoverers. But it was reserved for Edmund Curll, Pope's victim and accomplice, to carry the discovery a step further, and so to play Newton to Tonson's Kepler. Whether by happy chance or by laborious induction we cannot tell; but Curll hit on one of those epoch-making ideas which are so simple when once they are conceived, so difficult, save for the loftiest genius, in their first conception. It occurred to him that, in a world governed by the law of mortality, men might be handsomely entertained on one another's remains. He lost no time in putting his theory into action. During the years of his activity he published some forty or fifty separate *Lives*, intimate, anecdotal, scurrilous sometimes, of famous and notorious persons who had the ill fortune to die during his lifetime. He had learned the wisdom of the grave-digger in *Hamlet*, and knew that there are many rotten corpses nowadays, that will scarce hold the laying in. So he seized on them before they were cold, and commemorated them in batches. One of his titles runs: *The Lives of the most Eminent Persons who died in the Years 1711, 12, 13, 14, 15, in 4 Vols.* 8°. His books commanded a large sale, and modern biography was established.

The new taste reacted on the older poets, whose works were steadily finding a larger and larger audience. In 1723 one Giles Jacob, who was the son of a maltster in Hampshire, and had been bred to the law, edited, for Curll, a collection in two volumes called *The Poetical Register, or the Lives and Characters of all the English Poets, with an account of their Writings*. His work,

which is founded on Langbaine for the dramatic part, is meanly written, and, like many other meanly written works, is profusely illustrated. 'I have been very sparing,' says the editor, 'in my Reflections on the Merits of Writers, which is indeed nothing but anticipating the judgment of the Reader, and who after all will judge for himself.' Pope, perhaps after reading this sentence, called Jacob 'the scourge of grammar'. He and Congreve and other living writers were treated by the servile Jacob with a vapid monotony of commendation. In short, the book, like so much of later reviewing, is not critical; it belongs rather to the huge family of trade circulars and letters of introduction.

The effort to recover information concerning our older English poets was continued in the Eighteenth Century by the successors of Aubrey and Wood, chief among whom must be mentioned William Oldys and Thomas Coxeter.

Oldys (1696-1761) was one of those true antiquaries who are content to collect and arrange material to be used by others. 'The generous assistance of the candid Mr. Oldys' is acknowledged with gratitude by Mrs. Elizabeth Cooper in the preface to her book called *The Muses Library; Or a Series of English Poetry, from the Saxons, to the Reign of King Charles II. Containing The Lives and Characters of all the known Writers in that Interval, the Names of their Patrons; Complete Episodes, by way of Specimen of the larger Pieces, very near the intire Works of some, and large Quotations from others.* Vol I (1737). Mrs. Cooper is a modest and timid writer, but her brief Lives, prefixed to large selections from the English poets down to the time of Spenser, are something better than hack-work. She

examined books and consulted manuscripts for herself; having heard high praises of Lydgate, she 'gave a considerable Price for his Works, and waded thro' a large Folio', only to be disappointed by the industrious monk. She has the courage of her opinions; William Warner, she says, is 'an Author only unhappy in the Choice of his Subject, and Measure of his Verse'. Her book was never completed; it was printed for Osborne, who some years later employed Johnson and Oldys as fellow-labourers in the compilation of the *Harleian Miscellany*.

The other antiquary, Thomas Coxeter, who was of Aubrey's college in Oxford, devoted the whole of his busy life (1689-1747) to collecting the works of forgotten poets and amassing historical material. His books were dispersed at his death, but some of his material fell into the hands of Griffiths, Goldsmith's employer, who asserted that it was the basis for the last biographical collection that I shall discuss—*The Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland to the Time of Dean Swift. By Mr. Cibber* (1753). 5 vols. This important compilation, which probably suggested Johnson's great work, has had very little justice done to it in literary history. It is seldom mentioned save in connexion with the dispute about its authorship. There is no reason to distrust the categorical statements of Johnson, who must have been well informed. 'It was not written,' says Johnson, 'nor, I believe, ever seen, by either of the Cibbers; but was the work of Robert Shiels, a native of Scotland, a man of very acute understanding, though with little scholastic education, who, not long after the publication of his book, died in London of a consumption. His



life was virtuous, and his end was pious. Theophilus Cibber, then a prisoner for debt, imparted, as I was told, his name for ten guineas. The manuscript of Shiels,' he adds, 'is now in my possession.'

In some of its details this account has been amended and corrected. Cibber, it appears, did actually supervise and edit the work, striking out the Jacobite and Tory sentiments which Shiels had plentifully interspersed in the Lives that he contributed. For this labour of revision Cibber received twenty guineas. Shiels, on the other hand, wrote the chief part of the book, and received almost seventy pounds. Cibber and Shiels, as might be expected, quarrelled, and Shiels, who was for a time one of Johnson's dictionary amanuenses, doubtless communicated to Johnson his version of the affair.<sup>1</sup>

That Shiels is entitled to the chief credit of the work cannot be doubted. Internal evidence, as it is called, would alone be sufficient to establish his claim. Here, for instance, is a description of Edinburgh society,

<sup>1</sup> Mr. J. J. Champenois, who is investigating the history of the *Monthly Review*, has found in the Bodleian Library (*Add. MSS.* C. 89. 328), and has very kindly communicated to me, the articles of agreement between Shiels and Griffiths. They run as follows:—

Articles relating to the property & conducting a work entitled the *Lives of the Poets*, from Chaucer to Pope; to be printed in three volumes in Twelves. Mr. Rob<sup>t</sup> Shiells author.

1. It is proposed by the underwritten Proprietors, to publish this work in weekly N<sup>os</sup> at 3 Sheets each. R. Griffiths to be the publisher.

2. Fifteen N<sup>os</sup> to Complete the whole, at 6<sup>d</sup> each.

3. The n<sup>o</sup> to be printed is 1000.

4. Mr. Shiells to have 15/ p. Sheet.

5. The whole Expence of this work to be Jointly defrayed by the proprietors, whose Shares are consequently to be Equal.

London  
Nov<sup>r</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> 1752

W<sup>m</sup> Johnston  
Dan. Browne  
Ra: Griffiths.

extracted from the *Life of Mr. Samuel Boyse*, who came to that city from the lighter air of Dublin. The description seems to me to prove two things: that the author was a Scot; and that, consciously or unconsciously, he had formed his literary style wholly on the Johnsonian model.

The personal obscurity of Mr. Boyse (during his residence in Edinburgh) might perhaps not be altogether owing to his habits of gloominess and retirement. Nothing is more difficult in that city than to make acquaintances. There are no places where people meet and converse promiscuously. There is a reservedness and gravity in the manner of the inhabitants which makes a stranger averse to approach them. They naturally love solitude; and are very slow in contracting friendships. They are generous; but it is with a bad grace. They are strangers to affability, and they maintain a haughtiness, and an apparent indifference, which deters a man from courting them. They may be said to be

The agreement with Cibber, which was seen by Peter Cunningham at Puttick's auction-rooms on April 20, 1849, was dated November 13, 1752—exactly a week later than the above. In it Cibber undertook for £21 'to revise, correct, and improve a work now printing in four volumes', and to allow 'that his name shall be made use of as the author of the said work, and be inserted accordingly in the title-pages thereof and in any advertisements relative to it'.

When the work appeared it was in five volumes, made up of twenty-five parts of three sheets each, so that at the agreed rate of payment Shiels would receive £56 5s. The printer, Dan. Browne, was dead by 1754, in which year his widow sold his share for £50 to Griffiths and Johnston. (*Bodleian Add. MSS. C. 86. 118.*)

On the appearance of Johnson's *Lives* in 1781 Griffiths wrote the following letter to Edmund Cartwright, inventor of the Power Loom:—

Turnham Green, June 16<sup>th</sup>.

Dear Sir,—I have sent you a FEAST! Johnson's *new* volumes of the 'Lives of the Poets'. You will observe that Savage's *Life* is one of the volumes. I suppose it is the same which he published

hospitable, but not complaisant, to strangers. Insincerity and cruelty have no existence amongst them; but if they ought not to be hated they can never be much loved, for they are incapable of insinuation, and their ignorance of the world makes them unfit for entertaining sensible strangers. They are public-spirited, but torn to pieces by factions. A gloominess in religion renders one part of them very barbarous, and an enthusiasm in politics so transports the genteeler part, that they sacrifice to party almost every consideration of tenderness. Among such a people a man may long live, little known, and less instructed; for their reservedness renders them uncommunicative, and their excessive haughtiness prevents them from being solicitous of knowledge.

The Scots are far from being a dull nation; they are lovers of pomp and show, but then there is an eternal stiffness, a kind of affected dignity, which spoils their pleasures. Hence we have the less reason to wonder that Boyse lived obscurely at Edinburgh.

about thirty years ago, and therefore you will not be obliged to notice it otherwise than in the course of enumeration. In the account of Hammond, my good friend Samuel has stumbled on a material circumstance in the publication of Cibber's 'Lives of the Poets'. He intimates that Cibber never saw the work. This is a reflection on the bookseller, your humble servant. The bookseller has now in his possession Theophilus Cibber's receipt for twenty guineas (Johnson says ten,) in consideration of which he engaged to revise, correct, and improve the work, and also to affix his name in the title-page. Mr. Cibber did accordingly very punctually revise every sheet; he made numerous corrections, and added many improvements—particularly in those lives which came down to his own times, and brought him within the circle of his own and his father's literary acquaintance, especially in the dramatic line. To the best of my recollection, he gave *some* entire lives, besides inserting abundance of paragraphs, of notes, anecdotes, and remarks, in those which were compiled by Shiells and other writers. I say *other*, because many of the best pieces of biography in that collection were not written by Shiells, but by superior hands. In short, the engagement of Cibber, or some other *Englishman*, to superintend what Shiells in particular should offer, was a measure absolutely necessary, not only to guard against his Scotticisms and other defects of expression, but his virulent Jacobitism, which inclined him to abuse every Whig character that came in his way. This, indeed, he would have done, but Cibber (a staunch Williamite) opposed and prevented him, inso-

‘Quintilian,’ Ben Jonson said to Drummond, ‘will tell you your faults, as if he had lived with you.’ Does not the foregoing description embody the experience of many a young Scot, who knows and admires the virtues of his people, and has suffered from them, and dislikes them sometimes even in himself?

The *Life of Samuel Boyse*, from which I have quoted, gives, like Johnson’s *Life of Richard Savage*, a vivid picture of the straits to which professional authors were reduced under the rule of Walpole. It is narrated how, about the year 1740, Boyse was brought to the extremity of distress. Having pawned all his clothes he was confined to bed with no other covering but a blanket. ‘He sat up in bed with the blanket wrapt about him, through which he had cut a hole large enough to admit his arm, and placing the paper upon his knee, scribbled in the best manner he could the verses he was obliged to make. Whatever he got by

much that a violent quarrel arose on the subject. By the way, it seems to me that Shiells’ Jacobitism has been the only circumstance that has procured him the regard of Mr. Johnson, and the favourable mention that he has made (in the paragraph referred to) of Shiells’ ‘virtuous Life and pious End’—expressions that must draw a smile from every one who knows, as I did, the real character of Robert Shiells. And now, what think you of noticing this matter, in regard to truth and the fair name of the honest bookseller? (Quoted by Croker from the *Life of Edmund Cartwright*, 1843.)

The notice of Johnson’s *Lives* in the *Monthly Review* for December 1781, was almost certainly by Cartwright; it exactly reproduces the statements in Griffiths’ letter. But the earlier pages of the *Monthly Review* tell a different story. *The Companion to the Playhouse* (1764) was noticed in the *Monthly Review* for April 1765. The *Companion*, speaking of Cibber’s *Lives*, had said, ‘In this work his own peculiar share was very inconsiderable, many other hands having been concerned with him in it.’ On this the *Monthly Review* remarks—‘Not many; for excepting the entertaining account of the late Mrs. Chandler of Bath, (which was

those, or any of his begging letters, was but just sufficient for the preservation of his life.'

'Whenever his distresses so pressed as to induce him to dispose of his shirt, he fell upon an artificial method of supplying one. He cut some white paper in strips, which he tied round his wrists, and in the same manner supplied his neck. In this plight he frequently appeared abroad, with the additional inconvenience of want of breeches.'

'He fell upon some strange schemes of raising trifling sums. He sometimes ordered his wife to inform people that he was just expiring, and by this artifice work on their compassion. . . . At other times he would propose subscriptions for poems of which only the beginning and the conclusion were written; and by this expedient would relieve some present necessity.'

'He had so strong a propensity to groveling that his written by her brother, the learned Dr. Samuel Chandler), and the life of Aaron Hill, Esq.; drawn up by his daughter, Mrs. Urania Johnson,—the rest of the *Lives* were jointly composed by Mr. Cibber, and the late ingenious Mr. Robert Shiells; a Scotch gentleman, author of several poetical performances.—The life of Eustace Budgell, Esq.; was sent them by an unknown hand; and is an excellent piece of biography.' Yet the *Monthly Review*, when it advertised the work in December, 1753, had boasted of 'the variety in the manner, stile, and peculiar sentiments of the several compilers,' and had subsequently illustrated this variety by printing three *Lives* in full, two of the three being the *Lives* of Hill and Budgell.

What happened begins now to be clear. Shiells wrote the whole work, except the *Lives* of Hill, Budgell, and Mrs. Chandler. Cibber revised it. He subjoins a long note, signed T. C., to the *Life of Thomson*. Further, he prefixes to the *Life of Betterton* the heading 'Written by R. S.', thus very craftily implying that the rest of the book was his own. Griffiths wrote creeping letters, and told commodious broking lies, on the principle of 'sufficient unto the day'. When Shiells, who died a few months after the



acquaintance were generally of such a cast, as could be of no service to him.'

'The manner of his becoming intoxicated was very particular. As he had no spirit to keep good company, so he retired to some obscure ale-house, and regaled himself with hot twopenny, which though he drank in very great quantities, yet he had never more than a pennyworth at a time.'

'It was an affectation in Mr. Boyse to appear very fond of a little lap-dog which he always carried about with him in his arms, imagining it gave him the air of a man of taste.' When his wife died, 'Boyse, whose circumstances were then too mean to put himself in mourning, was yet resolved that some part of his family should. He step'd into a little shop, purchased half a yard of black ribbon, which he fixed round his dog's neck by way of mourning for the loss of its mistress.'

In 1749, the unhappy poet, whose works had been praised by Johnson and Fielding, died in obscure lodgings near Shoe Lane. 'The remains of this son of the Muses,' says his biographer, 'were with very little ceremony hurried away by the parish officers, and thrown amongst common beggars.'

Perhaps the chief value of Cibber's *Lives* is to be found in these obscurer memoirs, which give information concerning poets who would otherwise be forgotten. For the rest, the scheme of the work is more generous

book appeared, found out how he was being treated, he doubtless expressed his indignation to Johnson.

I am indebted to Mr. Nichol Smith for the elucidation of this problem. The corrections of Johnson's account which are given in the text are based on an article in the *Monthly Review* for May, 1792. The article may be by Griffiths, who, when his mystifications had served their turn, enjoyed the credit of clearing them up.

than that of Johnson's *Lives*. The lives of British poets are recorded, and their works enumerated, from Chaucer to Mrs. Mary Chandler. The private virtues of this lady are so copiously attested, that it is late in her biography before we make acquaintance with her claims to distinction in literature. She was the author, it seems, of a poem on the Bath, which had the full approbation of the public, and when death overtook her, at the age of fifty-eight, she was meditating a nobler flight, 'a large poem on the Being and Attributes of God, which was her favourite subject.' But this work, like the mammoth, was never seen by the eye of modern man save in impressive fragments.

Last of all comes Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* in 1781. The choice of names, whereby it appears that English poetry began with Abraham Cowley, was made not by Johnson, but by the booksellers of London who employed him. Johnson procured the insertion of the names of some few poets not originally included in the scheme. The *Lives*, except in some special cases, exhibit no laborious industry in the discovery of fact. They were written from a full mind, and with a flowing pen, at a time when Johnson's critical opinions had long been formed, and when he was quite indisposed to renew the detailed labours of the *Dictionary*. 'To adjust the minute events of literary history,' he says very truly in his *Life of Dryden*, 'is tedious and troublesome; it requires indeed no great force of understanding, but often depends upon enquiries which there is no opportunity of making, or is to be fetched from books and pamphlets not always at hand.' New information concerning the life of Pope was offered him, but he refused even to look at it; and he wrote

his criticism on the dramas of Rowe without opening the book to refresh the memories of his reading of thirty years before. This indolence, which would be a sin in an archaeologist or an historian, is almost a virtue in Johnson. His *Lives* make a single great treatise, defining and illustrating the critical system which he had built up during long years of reading and writing. He writes at ease, in the plenitude of his power, and with a full consciousness of his acknowledged authority. His work closes an age ; it is the Temple of Immortality of the great Augustans, and, when it was published, already Burns and Blake, Crabbe and Cowper, were beginning to write. With them came in new ideals, destined to affect both criticism and biography. So that the mention of Johnson's *Lives*, which demand a separate essay for their proper appreciation, may fitly close this catalogue.

## VI

### JOHNSON'S LIVES OF THE POETS

THE most memorable of Johnson's literary works was not initiated or planned by himself. On May 3, 1777, he wrote to Boswell, 'I am engaged to write little Lives, and little Prefaces, to a little edition of *The English Poets*.' The whole course of his life and studies had been an admirable preparation for this task of biography, and when, at the age of sixty-seven, he consented to forego his leisure, he must have felt how timely was the opportunity to establish his great critical reputation upon a solid base.

The origin of the scheme was explained by Mr. Edward Dilly in a letter to Boswell. The Martins, an Edinburgh firm, had printed, and had put on sale in London, an edition of the English Poets, presenting a very inaccurate text in type hardly large enough to be readable. This roused the London booksellers, who, in order to protect their own copyrights and to keep possession of the market, agreed together to produce an elegant and uniform edition of all the English Poets of repute, from Chaucer onwards, with a concise account of the life of each of them. A deputation waited upon Johnson; he 'seemed exceedingly pleased with the proposal', and named two hundred guineas as his fee. We are not told how it happened that the earlier poets, from Chaucer to Cowley, dropped out of the scheme; doubtless the desire to preserve copyright in the later

poets put great pressure upon the space available. Forty-eight poets were included in the booksellers' list: to these Johnson himself added the names of Blackmore, Watts, Pomfret, and Yalden. On the title-page of the first separate edition of the *Lives* thirty-six booksellers figure as proprietors of the work.

When this separate edition appeared, and the book was an assured success, the booksellers, of their own free motion, sent the author another hundred guineas. Malone comments on the extraordinary moderation of Johnson's demand. 'Had he asked one thousand, or even fifteen hundred guineas, the booksellers, who knew the value of his name, would doubtless have readily given it.' But Johnson refused to listen to any blame of them. 'Sir,' he said to Boswell, 'I have always said the booksellers were a generous set of men. Nor, in the present instance, have I reason to complain. The fact is, not that they have paid me too little, but that I have written too much.' In the statement prefixed to the separate edition he explains this further: 'My purpose was only to have allotted to every Poet an Advertisement, like those which we find in the French Miscellanies, containing a few dates and a general character, but I have been led beyond my intention, I hope, by the honest desire of giving useful pleasure.'

It is idle to challenge an agreement made between free agents. Johnson was a bad bargainer. He paid 'less attention to profit from his labours,' says Boswell, 'than any man to whom literature has been a profession.' He took a hundred pounds for *Rasselas*—to which the booksellers added twenty-five pounds later. Nothing would have induced him to chaffer about his wage; and he did not think it a hardship to stand by his agreements.



He thought himself happy in the character of the men with whom he had to deal. Speaking of the booksellers of Dryden's time he says: 'To the mercantile ruggedness of that race the delicacy of the poet was sometimes exposed.'

No discovery of importance emerges from this ancient controversy. It is very creditable to publishers that almost all the talking on the question has been done by authors. The hardship is not all on one side. Some authors are grasping and skilled in negotiation; some publishers are superstitious, and pay for a name more than a name is worth. Authors on the whole have this advantage, that they are in the habit of enjoying life, and so have a less eager anxiety for the future. Johnson could live on his pension; and the idea of writing the *Lives* pleased him. The two-hundred guineas may well have seemed to him an addition of luxury to his competence. An author will often take very little money for doing what he likes. A publisher must be more careful; he needs all the money he can get in order that he may do what he likes at some future day. His children may wish to be authors. The balance seems not unfair; and the relations between the two were more humane in Johnson's time than they can ever be when authors combine in a league of mutual defence and common aggression.

Johnson made his covenant with the booksellers on Easter Eve, 1777. The *Lives* were finished four years later, in March, 1781. 'I wrote them,' he says, 'in my usual way, dilatorily and hastily, unwilling to work, and working with vigour and haste.' They were written, no doubt, partly at No. 8, Bolt Court, and partly in the room which was always kept for him at Mrs. Thrale's house at

Streatham. Boswell, who had the manuscript in his possession, says that it was wonderful to see how correctly it was written at the first heat. 'I observe the fair hand of Mrs. Thrale,' he adds, 'as one of the copyists of selected passages.'

These *Lives* are the maturest and strongest of Johnson's works. It ought to be a comfort to men past middle life to find that Johnson, like Dryden, wrote his best prose in his latest years. Good poetry has been written by young, even by very young, men; the best prose is out of their reach. They are too full of ideas which have never borne the test of practice; their prose tends to rhapsody, or argument, or the abstract graces of the mathematics. In poetry they can give shape to vague hopes and desires; in the more matter-of-fact treatment which prose demands, if they strike the personal note, they fear to be foolish, and are foolish. The confessions of a young man are always too defiant or too exclusively self-conscious; he has his account yet to settle with the world, and does not know exactly how he stands. He is dealing with an unknown and powerful adversary, so that even while he aims at truth, the instinct of self-preservation overmasters him, and he achieves only diplomacy. The best prose is rightly called pedestrian; at every step it must find a foothold on the ground of experience, firm enough to support its weight. It is more various than poetry, and richer in implied meaning; it assumes in the reader an old acquaintance with the facts of life, and keeps him in touch with them by a hundred quiet devices of irony, reminiscence, and allusion. It is a commentary on the world; not a complete exposition of it. The breadth of the vision of poetry can be attained by one who looks on human life from a distance;

only the scarred veterans are fit to write a prose account of the battle.

In his *Life of Waller* Johnson defends the cause of age. Fenton, who produced a carefully annotated edition of Waller's poems, had remarked that after his fifty-fifth year the genius of the poet 'began to decline apace from its meridian'. 'This,' says Johnson, 'is to allot the mind but a small portion. Intellectual decay is doubtless not uncommon; but it seems not to be universal. Newton was in his eighty-fifth year improving his *Chronology*, a few days before his death; and Waller appears not, in my opinion, to have lost at eighty-two any part of his poetical power.' The famous lines in the epilogue to the *Divine Poems*, which were written at about the age of eighty, may well be quoted here, for they contain Waller's contribution to the question:

The soul's dark cottage, batter'd and decay'd,  
Lets in new light thro' chinks that time has made:  
Stronger by weakness, wiser, men become,  
As they draw near to their eternal home.  
Leaving the old, both worlds at once they view,  
That stand upon the threshold of the new.

*The Lives of the Poets* shows Johnson's vigour of judgment, as a critic of life and of letters, at its zenith. His power of putting into a single sentence all that can be profitably said on a subject, whether by way of summary or of comment, was never more brilliantly displayed. Addison's *Spectator* could not be better described than by being ranked, as Johnson ranks it, among those books which attempt 'to teach the minuter decencies and inferior duties, to regulate the practice of daily conversation, to correct those depravities which are rather ridiculous than criminal, and remove those grievances which, if they produce no lasting calamities, impress

hourly vexation.' Prior's *Solomon* could not be better criticized than in the sentence which remarks on the importance of its single fault: 'Tediousness is the most fatal of all faults; negligences or errors are single and local, but tediousness pervades the whole: other faults are censured and forgotten, but the power of tediousness propagates itself.'

Indeed, the *Lives* are crowded with good sayings. Here are some, taken from the first of them, the *Life of Cowley*:—

The true Genius is a mind of large general powers, accidentally determined to some particular direction.

The basis of all excellence is truth: he that professes love ought to feel its power.

Great thoughts are always general, and consist in positions not limited by exceptions, and in descriptions not descending to minuteness.

If that be considered as Wit which is at once natural and new, that which though not obvious is, upon its first production, acknowledged to be just; if it be that, which he that never found it, wonders how he missed; to wit of this kind the metaphysical poets have seldom risen.

If their conceits were far-fetched, they were often worth the carriage. To write on their plan it was at least necessary to read and think.

Men have been wise in very different modes; but they have always laughed the same way.

The artifice of inversion, by which the established order of words is changed, or of innovation, by which new words or new meanings of words are introduced, is practised, not by those who talk to be understood, but by those who write to be admired.

What is fit for every thing can fit nothing well.

Whoever professes to benefit by pleasing must please at once.

Not all these sayings, even when their application is limited by the context, carry immediate conviction with them; but there is none of them that does not compel

thought. They are weighted with meaning ; and if they are dogmatic are not tyrannical ; they belong rather to that genial kind of conversational dogma which suggests rich themes for friendly debate.

A discerning reader, who cares for the critic as much as for any of the poets whom the critic passes in review, will find that the *Lives* abound in personal reminiscence, and reflect light at many points on Johnson's own character and career. Sometimes they record curious facts of which the interest to Johnson was mainly personal, as, for instance, where, speaking of the marriages of John Sheffield, Duke of Buckinghamshire, he says: 'It is observable that the Duke's three wives were all widows.' Sometimes he embroiders his story with reflections borrowed from his own experience. After describing, on the authority of the early biographers, the regular course of Milton's day, and the exact assignment of its hours, he adds, 'So is his life described, but this even tenour appears attainable only in Colleges. He that lives in the world will sometimes have the succession of his practice broken and confused. Visitors, of whom Milton is represented to have had great numbers, will come and stay unseasonably ; business, of which every man has some, must be done when others will do it.' There is more, again, of Johnson than of Milton in the remarks on Milton's omission of a set hour for prayers: 'Of this omission the reason has been sought, upon a supposition which ought never to be made, that men live with their own approbation, and justify their conduct to themselves. Prayer certainly was not thought superfluous by him, who represents our first parents as praying acceptably in the state of innocence, and efficaciously after their fall. That he lived without prayer can hardly



be affirmed ; his studies and meditations were an habitual prayer. The neglect of it in his family was probably a fault for which he condemned himself, and which he intended to correct, but that death, as too often happens, intercepted his reformation.' Johnson is willing to believe that Milton, like himself, was continually making vows of self-reformation. The generosity of his criticism is seen in his severe reproof to possible objectors. *Samson Agonistes* certainly has in it a humility foreign to the earlier poems. Yet the idea of Milton condemning himself for a fault which he strove in vain to amend is difficult to accept. Perhaps it is not irreverent to say that the evidence for this attitude in Milton is of the slightest.

The same fellow-feeling dictates the last paragraph of the Life, where the poet is praised for his independence of spirit and lofty demeanour in adversity: 'He was naturally a thinker for himself, confident of his own abilities and disdainful of help or hindrance ; he did not refuse admission to the thoughts or images of his predecessors, but he did not seek them. From his contemporaries he neither courted nor received support ; there is in his writings nothing by which the pride of other authors might be gratified or favour gained, no exchange of praise nor solicitation of support. His great works were performed under discountenance and in blindness, but difficulties vanished at his touch ; he was born for whatever is arduous ; and his work is not the greatest of heroick poems, only because it is not the first.'

When Johnson first came to London from the obscurity of Lichfield, Henry Hervey, then an officer of the army, had paid him attention, and had entertained him among genteel company. 'He was a vicious man,' said Johnson,

speaking of this to Boswell, 'but very kind to me. If you call a dog HERVEY, I shall love him.' In the *Life of Walsh* he attributes a similar gratitude to Pope: 'The kindnesses which are first experienced are seldom forgotten. Pope always retained a grateful memory of Walsh's notice, and mentioned him in one of his latter pieces among those that had encouraged his juvenile studies:

Granville the polite,  
And knowing Walsh would tell me I could write.'

This is allowing too much to Pope, whose mention of Walsh, like his mention of his own mother, is artfully contrived to heighten his proper reputation for genius and virtue.

Johnson's very natural tendency to interpret the lives and characters of other poets by the likeness of his own is explicitly noted by Boswell. 'In drawing Dryden's character,' says Boswell, 'Johnson has given, I suppose unintentionally, some touches of his own.' It is not possible to identify precisely the passages that were in Boswell's mind; but no doubt these are some of them: 'He appears to have had a mind very comprehensive by nature, and much enriched with acquired knowledge. The power that predominated in his intellectual operations was rather strong reason than quick sensibility... With the simple and elemental passions, as they spring separate in the mind, he seems not much acquainted, and seldom describes them but as they are complicated by the various relations of society and confused in the tumults and agitations of life... When once he had engaged himself in disputation, thoughts flowed in on either side: he was now no longer at a loss; he had always objections and solutions at command... What

he had once written he dismissed from his thoughts, and, I believe, there is no example to be found of any correction or improvement made by him after publication.'

From his familiar handling of all questions connected with the literary profession, and his confident judgements on them, it would be easy to tell that the author of the *Lives* was a professional man of letters. And surely no professional man of letters ever spoke of his profession with so much modesty and good sense. The writer who condescends to the public which is to give him fame and money receives no manner of countenance from Johnson. Edmund Smith's tragedy of *Phaëdra and Hippolitus* failed on the stage. Addison, who had written a prologue for it, mentioned its failure as disgraceful to the nation. 'The authority of Addison is great,' says Johnson, 'yet the voice of the people, when to please the people is the purpose, deserves regard. In this question, I cannot but think the people in the right.' When Cowley's play, *Cutter of Coleman Street*, failed, Cowley, according to Dryden, received the news 'not with so much firmness as might have been expected from so great a man'. Johnson, though he highly commends the play, does not excuse Cowley. 'He that misses his end will never be as much pleased as he that attains it, even when he can impute no part of his failure to himself; and when the end is to please the multitude, no man perhaps has a right, in things admitting of gradation and comparison, to throw the whole blame upon his judges, and totally to exclude diffidence and shame by a haughty consciousness of his own excellence.' The common weakness of authors in this matter is skilfully laid bare by Johnson when he comes to speak of

Savage's single successful poem, *The Bastard*. 'Though he did not lose the opportunity which success gave him, of setting a high rate upon his abilities, but paid due deference to the suffrages of mankind when they were given in his favour, he did not suffer his esteem of himself to depend upon others, nor found any thing sacred in the voice of the people when they were inclined to censure him; he then readily shewed the folly of expecting that the publick should judge right, observed how slowly poetical merit had often forced its way into the world: he contented himself with the applause of men of judgement, and was somewhat disposed to exclude all those from the character of men of judgement who did not applaud him.'

Johnson often returns to this topic—as, indeed, it is often suggested by the records of the lives of authors—and never loses an opportunity of repeating his verdict. Can an author judge truly of his own productions? Dryden had asked the question, and had discussed it, not unfairly, in the preface to *Secret Love, or the Maiden Queen*. Self-love, he had admitted, may easily deceive. But this does not satisfy Johnson, who is for treating the question more drastically, and adds: 'He might have observed, that what is good only because it pleases cannot be pronounced good till it has been found to please.'

This view of literature opposes Johnson to those authors who refuse to plead before the tribunal of public opinion. Gibbon, in his *Memoirs*, says that 'the author himself is the best judge of his own performance', and his opinion has the support of almost all the romantic poets that ever lived. Among these Pope (one of the most romantic of poets in his attitude to himself and his

own work) comes up for judgement. In a passage of splendid directness and sincerity Johnson deals with Pope's habitual disguises: 'He very frequently professes contempt of the world, and represents himself as looking on mankind, sometimes with gay indifference, as on emmets of a hillock below his serious attention, and sometimes with glowing indignation, as on monsters more worthy of hatred than of pity. These were dispositions apparently counterfeited. How could he despise those whom he lived by pleasing, and on whose approbation his esteem of himself was superstructed? Why should he hate those to whose favour he owed his honour and his ease? Of things that terminate in human life the world is the proper judge: to despise its sentence, if it were possible, is not just; and if it were just is not possible. Pope was far enough from this unreasonable temper; he was sufficiently "a fool to Fame", and his fault was that he pretended to neglect it. His levity and his sullenness were only in his letters; he passed through common life, sometimes vexed and sometimes pleased, with the natural emotions of common men.'

An old-established public reputation is not, in Johnson's opinion, a thing that can be lightly set aside. Books find their proper level. 'Of a work so much read,' he says, speaking of Addison's *Cato*, 'it is difficult to say any thing new. About things on which the public thinks long it commonly attains to think right.' And again, speaking of Gray, he states the doctrine boldly and fully: 'In the character of his *Elegy* I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism



of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours.'

His own behaviour was in strict conformity with this belief. When his play, *Irene*, failed, 'this great man,' says Boswell, 'instead of peevishly complaining of the bad taste of the town, submitted to its decision without a murmur. He had, indeed, upon all occasions, a great deference for the general opinion: "A man (said he) who writes a book thinks himself wiser or wittier than the rest of mankind; he supposes that he can instruct or amuse them, and the publick to whom he appeals, must, after all, be the judges of his pretensions."''

I do not know where else to find an author in whom modesty and self-respect are so perfectly and equably blended. He is as he describes himself in the Prologue to *Irene*:

Studious to please, yet not asham'd to fail.

He pictures Milton suffering neglect, 'calm and confident, little disappointed, not at all dejected'; and where he finds evidence of irritation and rage in authors at the ill reception of their works it is one of the few things of which he is contemptuous. There are two of the English poets whom Johnson, in casual fashion, calls 'poor'—'poor Dryden' and 'poor Lyttelton'. There would be nothing remarkable in the phrase 'poor Dryden' if Carlyle had used it—or indeed in 'poor Dante', 'poor Homer', or 'poor Isaiah'. A certain exercise of contempt was necessary to Carlyle's mind, to keep it in health. But 'poor Dryden' from Johnson is remarkable. The epithet is provoked by Dryden's agitation of mind when Settle's *Empress of Morocco* met with public applause. 'Dryden could not now repress those emo-

tions, which he called indignation, and others jealousy ; but wrote upon the play and the dedication such criticism as malignant impatience could pour out in haste.' Settle's play, when it was published, was embellished with 'sculptures'. 'These ornaments,' says Johnson, 'seem to have given poor Dryden great disturbance.'

'Poor Lyttelton' is a longer story. The words gave deep offence to Lyttelton's admirers, especially in blue-stocking circles. Mr. William Weller Pepys, writing to Mrs. Montagu, laments that 'our dear and respectable friend should be handed down to succeeding generations under the appellation of poor Lyttelton'. 'Mrs. Vesey sounded the trumpet,' says Horace Walpole, and 'at a blue-stocking meeting held by Lady Lucan, Mrs. Montagu and Dr. Johnson kept at different ends of the chamber, and set up altar against altar there'. The passage in the *Life of Lyttelton* which caused these broils describes the reception of the *Dialogues of the Dead*. 'When they were first published,' Johnson wrote, 'they were kindly commended by the Critical Reviewers, and poor Lyttelton with humble gratitude returned, in a note which I have read, acknowledgements which can never be proper, since they must be paid either for flattery or for justice.' We have not read the note, so we cannot judge. Boswell dares to dispute Johnson's opinion on this point of conduct. An upright man, he says, who has been arraigned on a false charge, may, when he is acquitted, make a bow to the jury.

I quote these two expressions of contempt, because they indicate in brief Johnson's code for an author. The approbation of the public is important ; and a man should not affect to despise it. But it ranks with money and other external goods ; he must not abase himself to gain

or keep it, nor, when he misses it, must he vex his soul. As for literary rivalry and hostilities, no one was ever less touched by them than Johnson. 'Reputation,' he said, 'would be of little worth, were it in the power of every concealed enemy to deprive us of it'; and he was fond of quoting Bentley's saying: 'Depend upon it, no man was ever written down but by himself.'

The passages already quoted from the *Life of Milton* are conspicuous examples of Johnson's fairness. He was vigorously accused in his own day of prejudice and injustice towards certain of the English poets; and the echoes of that protest have not yet died away. 'Men,' as he himself remarked, 'are seldom satisfied with praise introduced or followed by any mention of defect.' This is a profound truth; there is something mysterious in the power of a single qualification to mar the effect of praise. Where love or admiration possesses the mind, there is no room for the thought of defect. A lover does not weigh faults against merits, and after striking a balance, proclaim his enthusiasm for the surplus. In these personal relations only the simplest statements are acceptable. It is a question not of balance, but of direction; not of various conflicting motives, but of the resulting action as it is seen in progress this way or that. When the progress is reversed, even for a moment, the change gives cause to suspect that the hostile forces are stronger than appears. If they were not very strong, they would not be visible.

All this is true; and it is true that Johnson does not offer unmixed praise to any of his fifty-two poets. He was an old man; the heat of his early affections was abated. He had to judge not only of men, but of books, which are sometimes good in parts. His was a new

experiment; of praise and blame there had been more than enough; he set himself to show the reason of things by a process of detailed criticism and analysis, so that his book is more than a history; it is a philosophy of letters. Many of the earlier writers of *Lives* had been servile eulogists. 'We have had too many honey-suckle *Lives* of Milton,' he said to Malone; 'mine shall be in another strain.' It is in another strain; a strain of a higher mood than if he had called on all the flowers of the valley

To strew the laureat herse where Lycid lies.

He strives to be just; and is most just in this, that when he comes to *Paradise Lost* he gives over all reckoning of faults, and breaks into unmeasured praise. The magic of Milton's early poems he had not felt; and he felt just enough of rational dislike for some parts of them to conceal from himself the operation of his strong political prejudice. But for this prejudice, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, which he praises with subtle discrimination, might perhaps have given him occasion for one of his great memorable passages of critical appreciation.

In treating of the events of Milton's life, he is sometimes fairer than the poet's devotees. A great man will concede more than a little man understands how to claim. Edward Phillips, Milton's nephew, pupil, and biographer, was exercised in mind about Milton's school-keeping, and says: 'Possibly his having proceeded so far in the education of youth may have been the occasion of some of his adversaries calling him pedagogue and school-master; whereas it is well known he never set up for a publick school to teach all the young fry of a parish, but only was willing to impart his learning

and knowledge to relations and the sons of gentlemen who were his intimate friends, and that neither his writings nor his way of teaching ever savoured in the least of pedantry.' 'Thus laboriously,' says Johnson, 'does his nephew extenuate what cannot be denied, and what might be confessed without disgrace. Milton was not a man who could become mean by a mean employment. This, however, his warmest friends seem not to have found; they therefore shift and palliate. He did not sell literature to all comers at an open shop; he was a chamber-milliner, and measured his commodities only to his friends.'

This same strong sense, which makes Phillips ridiculous by reminding him that a school-master's is an honest calling, finds ample exercise among the sentimentalities of literary history. Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, it is well known, has a highwayman for its hero. Its representation was said to have caused a large increase in the number of street-robbers. 'But this opinion,' says Johnson, 'is surely exaggerated. The play, like many others, was plainly written only to divert, without any moral purpose, and is therefore not likely to do good; nor can it be conceived, without more speculation than life requires or admits, to be productive of much evil. Highwaymen and house breakers seldom frequent the play-house or mingle in any elegant diversion; nor is it possible for any one to imagine that he may rob with safety because he sees Macheath reprieved upon the stage.' There is a sentence in the *Preface to Shakespeare* which might well be applied to clinch this matter: 'The truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players.'



Johnson was not in the least likely to fall into that solemn error which supposes that the populace, because they read few books, are not able to recognize the play of fancy.

Sometimes he takes an almost mischievous delight in judging poetical situations by the standard of common sense and daily practice. For instance, he calls *Henry and Emma*, Prior's adaptation of *The Nut-brown Maid*, 'a dull and tedious dialogue, which excites neither esteem for the man, nor tenderness for the woman. The example of Emma, who resolves to follow an outlawed murderer wherever fear and guilt shall drive him, deserves no imitation; and the experiment by which Henry tries the lady's constancy is such as must end either in infamy to her, or in disappointment to himself.' These Cowper calls 'his old fusty-rusty remarks upon Henry and Emma', yet adds: 'I agree with him, that morally considered both the knight and his lady are bad characters, and that each exhibits an example which ought not to be followed. The man dissembles in a way that would have justified the woman had she renounced him; and the woman resolves to follow him at the expense of delicacy, propriety, and even modesty itself. But when the critic calls it a dull dialogue, who but a critic will believe him?' These two verdicts are not much at odds; where they differ, modern opinion would probably support Johnson. Prior's poem is not only dull, but absurd. The wonderful simplicity and directness of the original *Nut-brown Maid* is exchanged for the stilted nonsense of a blue-stocking rhetorician, and, to make her language yet more incredible, a realistic plot is substituted for the delightfully playful setting of the fifteenth-century poem. In the original the man

and the woman conduct an artificial debate after the mediaeval fashion ; he dramatically invents every circumstance that may shake her attachment to him, and she accepts them all,—hunger, misery, and danger ; when at last he avows that there waits for him in the greenwood one who is fairer than the Nut-brown Maid, and dearer to his heart, she replies that she will gladly wait on them both as their servant ; and the cause is won. The occasion is imaginary, but the sincerity and passion of the pleading have made the poem a monument to the constancy of women. By changing all this into a love-story of real life, Prior destroys the character of the dialogue and of the persons ; the man becomes merely brutal, and the woman shameless ; so that the naked ugliness of the situation is very ill concealed under the garlands of decayed mythology which are hung about it. The two versions, set side by side in a very short example, will more than vindicate Johnson's censure. Here is the Nut-brown Maid—

O Lorde, what is this worlde's blisse, that chaungeth  
as the mone ?  
My somers day, in lusty may, is derked before the  
none ;  
I hear you say farwel, nay, nay, we departe not soo  
sone ;  
Why say ye so, wheder wyl ye goo, alas ! what have ye  
done ?  
Alle my welfare to sorow and care shulde chaunge yf  
ye were gon ;  
For in my mynde, of all mankynde, I love but you  
alone.

And here is Emma, or a piece of her, for she is terribly long-winded—

What is our bliss, that changeth with the moon ;  
And day of life, that darkens ere 'tis noon ?

What is true passion, if unblest it dies?  
 And where is Emma's joy, if Henry flies?  
 If love, alas! be pain; the pain I bear  
 No thought can figure and no tongue declare.  
 Ne'er faithful woman felt, nor false one feign'd,  
 The flames which long have in my bosom reign'd:  
 The god of love himself inhabits there,  
 With all his rage, and dread, and grief, and care,  
 His complement of stores, and total war.

If Johnson's condemnation of this sort of thing is fusty-rusty, Cowper's confession that he had given the poem a consecrated place in his memory is puffy-muffy—a word which Rossetti coined to describe some of Wordsworth's colloquial efforts.

Johnson's matter-of-fact commentary on many poetical conventions and imaginations gives us the clue to his main critical position. More than those who came immediately before him, he stands for the classical doctrine, in language and literature. The right work of his time, as he conceived it, was to reintroduce sincerity into literature; to make it actual and moving; to discard far-fetched themes, empty conventional ornament, extravagant metaphor, outworn poetic tradition; so that poetry might deliver its message in a language easy to understand—'like a man of this world'. His practice in this matter falls far short of the doctrine, in which yet he never wavered. His own mind was slow and ponderous in its movement: he had lived much alone in his youth; and it was natural to him to express his own sentiments with deliberate emphasis and measured dignity. On great or difficult themes he never fails; but he cannot always adapt his expression to matter of every day. Prior writes nervous classical English on the most trivial topics, and fails only where passion

crosses his path ; Johnson treats frivolous themes with all the cumbrous elaboration of scholastic philosophy, but when the matter is grave, and thought must follow it outside the traffic of daily intercourse, he is himself again, and strikes at it in English that has no flaw. Even the slightest of his earlier essays is not open to the charge that he brings against Pope. 'Never,' he says of the *Essay on Man*—'never were penury of knowledge and vulgarity of sentiment so happily disguised. The reader feels his mind full, though he learns nothing ; and when he meets it in its new array no longer knows the talk of his mother and his nurse'. Johnson's verbosity is duller than Pope's, less enlivened with plausible rhetoric and formal turns of wit ; but it is never empty.

His quarrel with the classical mythology appears again and again in the *Lives*. He held it to be a meaningless ornament, a useless remainder. The belief in the old gods was long dead, and allusions to them could only be idle. '*The Fan*,' he says, in the *Life of Gay*, 'is one of those mythological fictions which antiquity delivers ready to the hand ; but which, like other things that lie open to every one's use, are of little value. The attention naturally retires from a new tale of Venus, Diana, and Minerva.' And again, of Waller : 'He borrows too many of his sentiments and illustrations from the old mythology, for which it is vain to plead the example of ancient poets : the deities which they introduced so frequently were considered as realities, so far as to be received by the imagination, whatever sober reason might even then determine. But of these images time has tarnished the splendor. A fiction, not only detected but despised, can never afford a solid basis to any position, though sometimes it may furnish a transient allusion or

slight illustration. No modern monarch can be much exalted by hearing that, as Hercules had his *club*, he has his *navy*'. Even Pope, though he does not very often enter what Johnson calls 'the dark and dismal regions of mythology', yet never enters them without provoking the censure of the critic. Addison, in *The Campaign*, had derided mythological aids to a feeble poem:

When actions unadorn'd are faint and weak,  
Cities and countries must be taught to speak.  
Gods may descend in factions from the skies,  
And rivers from their oozy beds arise.

'It is therefore strange,' says Johnson, speaking of *Windsor Forest*, 'that Pope should adopt a fiction not only unnatural but lately censured. The story of Lodona is told with sweetness; but a new metamorphosis is a ready and puerile expedient: nothing is easier than to tell how a flower was once a blooming virgin, or a rock an obdurate tyrant.'

These protests, which recur in many forms, and on many occasions, are indicative of Johnson's attitude. The men of the Renaissance had been captured by the beauty of the classical mythology; they could not revive it as a system of thought, but they felt the charm of the dream from which the world had been awakened, and they 'cried to sleep again'. But the aroused imagination would not be denied its full play upon life, and these ancient forms and fables fell gradually out of esteem. They became conventions and trappings of poetry rather than a mode of poetic insight. The history of English poetry from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century is the history of their decline. The Elizabethans borrowed from Ovid and Virgil; Dryden did more than that; he put himself to school to the Latin poets, and applied



their lessons to the facts of his own day. Pope's *Imitations of Horace* are modern in every detail. But even Pope loved at times to dress himself in the vanities of learning; and the lesser poetry of the eighteenth century is encrusted with dead mythology. All this Johnson opposed; and he, more than any other single writer, delivered poetry from what had now become a tedious bondage, and cleared the way for a more scientific and imaginative treatment of ancient fable by the poets who came after him. He could not foresee this later development; nor did he himself attach any possible value to fictions that deal with what he calls 'exploded beings'. When once their use as ornament was disallowed, his own profound and sincere religious convictions forbade him to seek for truth in them, or to tolerate them in connexion with serious subjects and real events. His criticism on the epitaph which Pope had written for Rowe's tomb in Westminster Abbey shows how strongly and consistently he felt on this matter. One of the lines of the epitaph ran—

Peace to thy gentle shade, and endless rest!

'To wish *Peace to thy shade*,' says Johnson, 'is too mythological to be admitted into a Christian temple; the ancient worship has infected almost all our other compositions, and might therefore be contented to spare our epitaphs. Let fiction, at least, cease with life, and let us be serious over the grave.'

Another ancient piece of poetic machinery was invariably condemned by Johnson. Pastoral allegory, which was brought into modern literature by the Renaissance imitators of Theocritus and Virgil, seemed to him to be a mere trick for supplying the form of poetry

where the reality was lacking. Why should a poet pretend to be a shepherd, and translate real passion into the jargon of a rustic trade? The famous criticism on *Lycidas* was not primarily dictated by personal or political hostility to Milton; the substance of it is repeated in many passages of the *Lives*. The *Elegies* of Hammond are criticized in almost the same words. 'The truth is,' says Johnson, 'these elegies have neither passion, nature, nor manners. Where there is fiction, there is no passion; he that describes himself as a shepherd, and his Neaera or Delia as a shepherdess, and talks of goats and lambs, feels no passion. He that courts his mistress with Roman imagery, deserves to lose her; for she may with good reason suspect his sincerity.' And again, of Shenstone's *Pastoral Ballad* he says: 'I cannot but regret that it is pastoral; an intelligent reader acquainted with the scenes of real life sickens at the mention of the *crook*, the *pipe*, the *sheep*, and the *kids*.' Lord Lyttelton is even more summarily treated. 'Of his *Progress of Love*,' says the biographer, 'it is sufficient blame to say that it is pastoral.'

Where Johnson repeats a thought many times, it is always worth while to pause, and look for his meaning. He found *Lycidas* lacking in that deep personal affection and regret which, to him, was the soul of an elegy. 'What image of tenderness,' he asks, 'can be excited by these lines?—

We drove a field, and both together heard  
What time the grey fly winds her sultry horn,  
Battening our flocks with the fresh dews of night.

'We know that they never drove a field, and that they had no flocks to batten; and though it be allowed that the representation may be allegorical, the true meaning

is so uncertain and remote that it is never sought because it cannot be known when it is found.'

The hot partisans of Milton have not answered this criticism. Is the grey fly a real grey fly? If it is, what is it doing among the allegorical flocks? If not, what does it mean? The fact, no doubt, is that Milton was recalling real experiences, and imperfectly veiling them under similitudes beautiful in themselves, and somewhat mistily applied to the facts. Johnson complains of this vagueness because it seems to him to belie the poignancy of the mourner's grief. He contrasts with *Lycidas* Cowley's elegy on his friend Hervey; and, indeed, there can be no question which of the two poems is the more vivid in its memories and the tenderer in its affection:—

Ye fields of Cambridge, our dear Cambridge, say,  
Have ye not seen us walking every day?  
Was there a *Tree* about which did not know  
The *Love* betwixt us two?

Henceforth, ye gentle *Trees* for ever fade;  
Or your sad branches thicker joyn,  
And into darksome shades combine,  
*Dark* as the *Grave* wherein my *Friend* is laid.

But there is no need to bring Cowley into the question; Johnson has himself left an elegy which illustrates his creed by his practice. The lines *On the Death of Dr. Robert Levett*, Johnson's friend and pensioner, who practised medicine among the very poor, are the best explanation of his doctrine.

No summons mock'd by chill delay,  
No petty gains disdain'd by pride;  
The modest wants of every day  
The toil of every day supply'd.  
His virtues walk'd their narrow round,  
Nor made a pause, nor left a void;  
And sure the Eternal Master found  
His single talent well employ'd.

The busy day, the peaceful night,  
 Unfelt, uncounted, glided by ;  
 His frame was firm, his powers were bright,  
 Though now his eightieth year was nigh.

Then, with no throbs of fiery pain,  
 No cold gradations of decay,  
 Death broke at once the vital chain,  
 And freed his soul the nearest way.

This is a poor thing, perhaps, to set beside the splendours of *Lycidas* ; yet it has in it all that Johnson looked for, half puzzled, in that greater elegy, and looked for in vain. It tells us more of Levett than of Johnson ; in *Lycidas* we are told more of Milton than of Edward King.

Johnson's dislike of blank verse is easily explained ; it is of a piece with the rest of his doctrine. Poetry, according to him, should express natural sentiments in language, dignified indeed, but not too remote from the speech of daily life. The use of new words, or of an unfamiliar order of words, destroys, as he remarks in his essay on Cowley, the intimacy and confidence of the relation between writer and reader. But if this be so, it may at once be objected that verse is at a disadvantage compared with prose. If all is to be on an easy, natural level of probability and familiarity, why not write in prose ?

Johnson could not have answered this question quite so confidently as some other poets can. His own diction tends to the prosaic. Where it fails to be simple, it fails by dropping into the extravagances not of verse, but of prose. He wrote prose better than verse ; and it may be suspected that he would have agreed with Sir Henry Savile, who, when asked his opinion of poetry, declared that he liked it best of all kinds of writing, next to prose.

Yet, of course, Johnson knew the addition of pleasure which comes from verse—the pleasure of melody and pattern. Coleridge, in his *Table Talk*, offers what he calls ‘my homely definitions of prose and poetry’. Prose, he says, is ‘words in their best order’; poetry is ‘the best words in the best order’. But this seems not to be sufficient. The best words may be set in the best order even by a prose writer. Poetry aims rather at increasing, by metrical devices, the number of best places for the best words in the best order. Of these devices rhyme is perhaps the chief. Johnson held rhyme to be almost essential to poetry; disallowing, as he did, inversions of order and novelties of diction, he believed that blank verse was without the necessary means of poetic emphasis. Blank verse, written in the quiet fashion that he liked, seemed to him to be merely prose, cut into lengths, and oscillating to a hardly recognizable tune.

His view of this matter is expounded in the essay on Milton; ‘Poetry may subsist without rhyme; but English poetry will not often please; nor can rhyme ever be safely spared, but where the subject is well able to support itself.’ His criticism of Somervile’s *Rural Sports* adds clearness to the explanation: ‘If blank verse be not tumid and gorgeous, it is crippled prose; and familiar images in laboured language have nothing to recommend them but absurd novelty, which, wanting the attractions of Nature, cannot please long.’

There are three of the English poets whose blank verse Johnson commends; they are Milton, Thomson, and Young. The reasons that he gives for allowing these exceptions prove that he had pondered the question with an open mind, and was not the victim of a mere



prejudice. Of Thomson's *Seasons* he says: 'His is one of the works in which blank verse seems properly used; Thomson's wide expansion of general views, and his enumeration of circumstantial varieties, would have been obstructed and embarrassed by the frequent intersections of the sense which are the necessary effects of rhyme. His descriptions of extended scenes and general effects bring before us the whole magnificence of Nature, whether pleasing or dreadful.' Of Young's *Night Thoughts* he says: 'This is one of the few poems in which blank verse could not be changed for rhyme but with disadvantage. The wild diffusion of the sentiments and the digressive sallies of imagination would have been compressed and restrained by confinement to rhyme.' As for Milton—'I cannot wish his work,' says Johnson, 'to be other than it is; yet like other heroes he is to be admired rather than imitated. He that thinks himself capable of astonishing may write blank verse, but those that hope only to please must condescend to rhyme.'

Blank verse, therefore, is permitted to poets who would describe wide landscapes, or indulge unfettered imagination, or express conceptions of superhuman majesty in unusual and gorgeous language. Such poets are warned, in the essay on Akenside, of the risk they run: 'The exemption which blank verse affords from the necessity of closing the sense with the couplet, betrays luxuriant and active minds into such self-indulgence that they pile image upon image, ornament upon ornament, and are not easily persuaded to close the sense at all. Blank verse will therefore, I fear, be too often found in description exuberant, in argument loquacious, and in narration tiresome.'

These are reasonable and well-argued opinions, worth the hearing. Johnson, it may be said, had no ear for the subtleties of metrical cadence. But the habits and pleasures of the ear vary so amazingly from generation to generation, that all dogmatic judgement is unsafe. It is praise enough for the critic that his account of the perils attending on blank verse has been illustrated many times in the work of later poets.

To get rid of the affectations, conventions, and extravagances of literature; to make it speak to the heart on themes of universal human interest; to wed poetry with life;—these were Johnson's aims. It is a little bewildering to the student of literary history to find that Pope, Johnson, and Wordsworth, each and all regarded themselves as the champions of a Return to Nature. Johnson, like Pope, confined nature somewhat too rigorously to human nature, and over-estimated the power of direct moral teaching. He speaks slightly of the innovators who 'seem to think that we are placed here to watch the growth of plants, or the motions of the stars. Socrates was rather of opinion that what we had to learn was, how to do good and avoid evil'. Yet in criticizing the works of other men he does not apply this doctrine in any narrow or unintelligent fashion. He praised Shakespeare; he praised Boccaccio; and he would doubtless have praised the great poets of the nineteenth century, whose work conforms very little to his own stricter code. Perhaps his chief difference from the critics of other schools is to be found in his comparatively low estimate of the importance of poetry; and this was due, not to any contempt, for he had been all his life a reader and lover of poetry, but to his deep sense of the greater issues of life and death. Literature

can but describe what all men, literate and illiterate alike, have to suffer and enjoy. The goodness of a poem, is, at best, a subordinate kind of goodness. This view finds amusing expression in his comment on the Reverend Mr. Milbourne, who attacked Dryden's translation of Virgil. 'His outrages,' says Johnson, 'seem to be the ebullitions of a mind agitated by stronger resentment than bad poetry can excite.'

Yet he is so far from narrow, that in many of his opinions he is in sympathy with later Romantic criticism. When he tells how Denham, in his earlier practice of the rhyming couplet, carried on the sense from line to line, and broke the unity of the couplet, he adds:— 'From this concatenated metre he afterwards refrained, and taught his followers the art of concluding their sense in couplets; which has perhaps been with rather too much constancy pursued.' The war against the closed couplet, which was so fiercely waged by Keats, has its apologist even in Johnson.

Nor will he allow the carping of prosaic critics against the freedoms of poetic language. In *Astraea Redux* the following couplet occurs:—

An horrid *stillness* first *invades* the ear,  
And in that silence we a tempest fear.

For this Dryden was 'persecuted with perpetual ridicule': Johnson defends him in a passage of notable good sense: 'Silence is indeed mere privation; and, so considered, cannot invade; but privation likewise certainly is *darkness*, and probably *cold*, yet poetry has never been refused the right of ascribing effects or agency to them as to positive powers. No man scruples to say that *darkness* hinders him from his work, or that *cold* has

killed the plants. Death is also privation, yet who has made any difficulty of assigning to Death a dart and the power of striking ?'

A good deal of ridicule is bestowed by Johnson, in one place and another, on the favourite plea of the poets, that their work owes its excellence to causes beyond their control. He makes fun of Milton for fearing that 'an age too late, or cold climate,' may depress his poetic powers. In a fit of wicked humour he tries to comfort the author of *Paradise Lost*. 'General causes,' he says, 'must operate uniformly in a general abatement of mental power ; if less could be performed by the writer, less likewise would content the judges of his work. Among this lagging race of frosty grovellers he might still have risen into eminence by producing something which "they should not willingly let die". However inferior to the heroes who were born in better ages, he might still be great among his contemporaries, with the hope of growing every day greater in the dwindle of posterity : he might still be the giant of the pygmies, the one-eyed monarch of the blind.' In his criticism of Pope's epitaphs Johnson nevertheless allows a kind of inspiration to poets ; though he will not allow any poet to allege the absence of it by way of excuse. 'It will not always happen,' he says, 'that the success of a poet is proportionate to his labour. The same observation may be extended to all works of imagination, which are often influenced by causes wholly out of the performer's power, by hints of which he perceives not the origin, by sudden elevations of mind which he cannot produce in himself, and which sometimes rise when he expects them least.' The author of the *Dictionary* knew as well as another man that if a great work of compila-

tion can be produced by fixed resolve and hard labour, a great work of imagination cannot.

Johnson was a much more liberal judge of poetry than Boileau and the critics of the French school. Yet Boileau, he says, 'will be seldom found mistaken,' and he agrees with Boileau in his opinion of devotional poetry. He treats this matter at large in the essay on Waller. His argument, which is closely reasoned and eloquently expressed, must be quoted in full:—

Let no pious ear be offended if I advance, in opposition to many authorities, that poetical devotion cannot often please. The doctrines of religion may indeed be defended in a didactick poem, and he who has the happy power of arguing in verse will not lose it because his subject is sacred. A poet may describe the beauty and the grandeur of Nature, the flowers of the Spring, and the harvests of Autumn, the vicissitudes of the Tide, and the revolutions of the Sky, and praise the Maker for his works in lines which no reader shall lay aside. The subject of the disputation is not piety, but the motives to piety; that of the description is not God, but the works of God.

Contemplative piety, or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical. Man admitted to implore the mercy of his Creator and plead the merits of his Redeemer is already in a higher state than poetry can confer.

The essence of poetry is invention; such invention as, by producing something unexpected, surprises and delights. The topicks of devotion are few, and being few are universally known; but, few as they are, they can be made no more; they can receive no grace from novelty of sentiment, and very little from novelty of expression.

Poetry pleases by exhibiting an idea more grateful to the mind than things themselves afford. This effect proceeds from the display of those parts of nature which attract, and the concealment of those which repel, the imagination: but religion must be shewn as it is; sup-



pression and addition equally corrupt it, and such as it is, it is known already.

From poetry the reader justly expects, and from good poetry always obtains, the enlargement of his comprehension and elevation of his fancy; but this is rarely to be hoped by Christians from metrical devotion. Whatever is great, desirable, or tremendous, is comprised in the name of the Supreme Being. Omnipotence cannot be exalted; Infinity cannot be amplified; Perfection cannot be improved.

The employments of pious meditation are Faith, Thanksgiving, Repentance, and Supplication. Faith, invariably uniform, cannot be invested by fancy with decorations. Thanksgiving, the most joyful of all holy effusions, yet addressed to a Being without passions, is confined to a few modes, and is to be felt rather than expressed. Repentance, trembling in the presence of the judge, is not at leisure for cadences and epithets. Supplication of man to man may diffuse itself through many topicks of persuasion, but supplication to God can only cry for mercy.

Of sentiments purely religious, it will be found that the most simple expression is the most sublime. Poetry loses its lustre and its power, because it is applied to the decoration of something more excellent than itself. All that pious verse can do is to help the memory and delight the ear, and for these purposes it may be very useful; but it supplies nothing to the mind. The ideas of Christian Theology are too simple for eloquence, too sacred for fiction, and too majestick for ornament; to recommend them by tropes and figures is to magnify by a concave mirror the sidereal hemisphere.

This is powerful argument, but perhaps it proves more than Johnson intended. If a subject can be too serious for poetry, then poetry, it would seem, must be confined to graceful fiction. If repentance is not at leisure for cadences and epithets, neither is love, nor any other passion. To this Johnson might perhaps have replied that the poet, who can retire from the presence

of his mistress, and compose his lyrics in solitude, cannot retire from the presence of his Maker. The motives of religion he felt to be too awful and too omnipresent to permit of the play of imagination. His view is based ultimately not on argument, but on reverential fear. Even thanksgiving 'is to be felt rather than expressed'. All that can be said of the Supreme Being is said when his name is named.

Dr. Isaac Watts, in his long critical preface to the *Horae Lyricae*, had argued with no less fervour on the other side. 'There is nothing,' he said, 'amongst all the ancient Fables or later Romances, that have two such Extremes united in them, as the Eternal God becoming an Infant of Days; the Possessor of the Palace of Heaven laid to sleep in a manger; . . . and the Sovereign of Life stretching his Arms on a Cross, bleeding and expiring: The Heaven and the Hell in our Divinity are infinitely more delightful and dreadful than the Childish Figments of a Dog with three Heads, the Buckets of the *Belides*, the Furies with snaky Hairs, or all the flowry Stories of *Elysium*. And if we survey the one as Themes divinely true, and the other as a Medley of Fooleries which we can never believe, the Advantage for touching the Springs of Passion will fall infinitely on the Side of the Christian Poet; our Wonder and our Love, our Pity, Delight, and Sorrow, with the long Train of Hopes and Fears, must needs be under the Command of an harmonious Pen, whose every Line makes a Part of the Reader's Faith, and is the very Life or Death of his Soul.'

Where theory is thus divided, the appeal must be to practice. Watts himself strengthens his case by quoting the poetry of the Psalms and the Book of Job.

Mrs. Thrale tells how, when Johnson would try to repeat the *Dies Irae*, 'he could never pass the stanza ending thus, *Tantus labor non sit cassus*, without bursting into a flood of tears ; which sensibility (she adds) I used to quote against him when he would inveigh against devotional poetry.' And the best hymns of Watts deserve a larger allowance of praise than they receive from Johnson. Yet Watts in his religious poetry does illustrate the truth of Johnson's remarks. He is often splendid, but it is a monotonous and vague splendour. There is usually no progress in his theme, so that the order of his verses might be rearranged, and new poems compounded by selection, without loss of meaning. The following verses, taken from scattered places in the *Poems Sacred to Devotion and Piety*, show the author's metaphysical grasp. Some of them describe the Godhead :—

Life, Death, and Hell, and Worlds unknown  
 Hang on his firm Decree :  
 He sits on no precarious Throne,  
 Nor borrows Leave to Be.

The Tide of Creatures ebbs and flows,  
 Measuring their Changes by the Moon :  
 No Ebb his Sea of Glory knows ;  
 His Age is one Eternal Noon.

Some of them are addressed to the Godhead :—

Still restless Nature dies and grows ;  
 From Change to Change the Creatures run :  
 Thy Being no Succession knows,  
 And all thy vast Designs are one.

A glance of thine runs thro' the Globes,  
 Rules the bright Worlds, and moves their Frame :  
 Broad sheets of Light compose thy Robes ;  
 Thy Guards are form'd of living Flame.

Some of them make confession that the subject transcends the capacity of human thought:—

Reason may grasp the massy Hills  
And stretch from Pole to Pole,  
But half thy Name our Spirit fills,  
And overloads our Soul.

In vain our haughty Reason swells,  
For nothing's found in Thee  
But boundless Unconceivables,  
And vast Eternity.

If these verses, and others like them, deserve high praise, they also very clearly illustrate Johnson's objections to devotion in verse. They are a kind of Hymn to Spaciousness. Detail is beneath their notice. The thing once said can only be repeated, with very little novelty of expression. Yet it is strange to remember that Johnson objected to the details in Shakespeare's description of Dover Cliff, and maintained that in order to impress the mind with an idea of immense height, it should be 'all vacuum'. The conclusion would seem to be that his objection to religious poetry cannot be prevented from recoiling with some force on the classical doctrine of his age. A consistent preference for general statements will always, in the long run, make poetry dull.

He was a staunch Englishman: in many disputed questions he cut loose from the orderly doctrines of the Latin peoples, and boldly declared for the freer and more spontaneous usages of English poetry. He defends Shakespeare for neglecting the vaunted dramatic unities. What is more remarkable, he decides against the establishment of a literary academy in England, 'which I,' he says, 'who can never wish to see dependence multiplied, hope the spirit of English liberty will hinder or destroy.' Men of letters in England have always nibbled

at this idea of an academy. But for the death of King James I, the scheme of Edmund Bolton, which was to establish an order of men of science and literature, and to subordinate it to the Order of the Garter, would probably have been carried through. A similar scheme was set on foot by Dryden and Roscommon; and another by Swift and Harley. Yet nothing was done. The Seventeenth Century incorporated the sciences, and the Eighteenth Century founded an academy of the fine arts; the Nineteenth Century did not complete their work by founding an academy of letters. Macaulay, in the last year of his life, spent an afternoon in drawing up a list of forty names for an imaginary English academy; but the forty are now dead, and the academy is yet to build. What Johnson has to say on the question he says in his *Life of Roscommon*:—

In this country an academy could be expected to do but little. If an academician's place were profitable it would be given by interest; if attendance were gratuitous it would be rarely paid, and no man would endure the least disgust. Unanimity is impossible, and debate would separate the assembly.

But suppose the philological decree made and promulgated, what would be its authority? In absolute governments there is sometimes a general reverence paid to all that has the sanction of power and the countenance of greatness. How little this is the state of our country needs not to be told. We live in an age in which it is a kind of publick sport to refuse all respect that cannot be enforced. The edicts of an English academy would probably be read by many, only that they might be sure to disobey them.

That our language is in perpetual danger of corruption cannot be denied; but what prevention can be found? The present manners of the nation would deride authority, and therefore nothing is left but that every writer should criticise himself.



The argument could not be better stated; yet something remains to be said. Language, it is now known, exhibits perpetual change and growth; the agencies of that change and growth are the only competent law-givers. Of these agencies literature is the least original; its success and vitality are due to the invasion of new ideas, and new forms of speech, from the life of a complex society. The perfection of stability, if it could be attained, would mean the arrest and death of language. The business of an academy is therefore to govern change; and for this business an academy is ill fitted. It must inevitably consist of men of letters who have already won their way to public esteem. These men might perhaps preserve the great literature of bygone ages and foster its influence; they would be more likely to pay undue honour to yesterday, and to shut the gate against to-morrow. They would certainly be men of mature years, and the chief of their duties would be the choice of younger associates. But an older man is commonly more willing to befriend a younger man than to learn from him; the recruits would, for the most part, be disciples, imitators, and admirers of the reigning dynasty, while the rebels, to whom the future belongs, would be left to form their own societies. No academy has yet conquered this difficulty, or found the secret of a perpetuity of influence. Those that have managed to keep their names in repute have done so by carefully watching the movements of public opinion, and by employing their rewards to ratify honours that have been gained on a wider field. The members of academies, like the Chinese, grant decorations to their ancestors. The incorporation of men of letters may serve to lend a touch of ceremonial colour to the close of a lonely

life; but it can never control the mysterious processes of language which blossoms in the market-place, or of thought which germinates in the darkness.

After all, it is not on vexed questions of literature that Johnson is seen at his best and greatest, but in judgements on human life and human motives. Against these judgements there have been wonderfully few effective appeals. Sometimes he lets fall an impatient dogmatic sentence, which, it will be found, is provoked not so much by the conduct of the poet, as by the partiality and servility of the poet's abettors and eulogists. The public is an easy-going self-indulgent master, and a very lenient judge of the faults of its favourites. If a man has increased the public stock of wisdom or gaiety, there will always be those who stop their ears to the just complaints of his wife. Johnson practised no such leniency; in his judgement the poetical profession is of no more avail than a mechanical trade to exonerate a man from the common obligations of humanity. Yet when he deals with weakness, inconsistency, and error, where these have not been made the subjects of foolish praise he will always be found quick to understand, and reluctant to condemn. No one knew better than Johnson that if men have much to strive for, they have more to suffer. There is something very moving in the sentence on Savage: 'If his miseries were sometimes the consequences of his faults, he ought not yet to be wholly excluded from compassion, because his faults were very often the effects of his misfortunes.'

Of Johnson's care to be just an example may be taken from his Life of Dryden. Controversy has always been exercised upon Dryden's conversions, in politics and religion. These conversions have seemed to some bio-

graphers too well timed to be sincere. The poet was born into a parliamentary family, and after the death of Cromwell praised his rule in a copy of *Heroic Stanzas on the late Lord Protector*. When the king was restored, the poet welcomed him by publishing *Astraea Redux*. The rule of Richard Cromwell had converted many backsliders, and Johnson's verdict is perfectly just: 'The reproach of inconstancy was, on this occasion, shared with such numbers that it produced neither hatred nor disgrace; if he changed, he changed with the nation. It was, however, not totally forgotten when his reputation raised him enemies.' On the accession of King James, Dryden declared himself a convert to Roman Catholicism. This has excited graver question, because his position at Court and his emoluments as poet laureate seemed concerned in the change. Yet any one who reads the *Religio Laici* with care will find, in that apology of a Church of England man, some curious portents of the later event.

Such an omniscient Church we wish indeed;  
 'Twere worth both Testaments, and cast in the Creed;  
 —so Dryden had written in 1682. Johnson's discussion of the change is a model of judgement: 'That conversion will always be suspected that apparently concurs with interest. He that never finds his error till it hinders his progress towards wealth or honour will not be thought to love Truth only for herself. Yet it may easily happen that information may come at a commodious time; and as truth and interest are not by any fatal necessity at variance, that one may by accident introduce the other. When opinions are struggling into popularity, the arguments by which they are opposed or defended become more known; and he that changes his profession would

perhaps have changed it before, with the like opportunities of instruction. This was then the state of popery; every artifice was used to shew it in its fairest form: and it must be owned to be a religion of external appearance sufficiently attractive.

‘It is natural to hope that a comprehensive is likewise an elevated soul, and that whoever is wise is also honest. I am willing to believe that Dryden, having employed his mind, active as it was, upon different studies, and filled it, capacious as it was, with other materials, came unprovided to the controversy, and wanted rather skill to discover the right than virtue to maintain it. But enquiries into the heart are not for man; we must now leave him to his Judge.’

Nothing is more admirable in Johnson than his splendid tolerance of bad characters. Boswell was perhaps a little timid in his record of this; it appears most luminously in the conversations recorded by Miss Burney. She stayed with the Thrales at Streatham in August 1778; Johnson was in the house; he had just finished the *Life of Dryden*, and was engaged on *Butler*. Some passages of his conversation shall be quoted here, though from a well-known source, because they show the author of the *Lives of the Poets* at his ease, and exhibit in him that broad enjoyment of human character which fitted him for his biographical task. When mention was made at table that Johnson would not hear Sir John Hawkins abused, he rose to the occasion. ‘As to Sir John,’ he said, ‘why really I believe him to be an honest man at the bottom: but to be sure he is penurious, and he is mean, and it must be owned he has a degree of brutality, and a tendency to savageness, that cannot easily be defended.’ ‘We all laughed (says

Miss Burney), as he meant we should, at this curious manner of speaking in his favour.'

Some days later a conversation took place which must be given in full. Johnson had been praising Mrs. Thrale for her sense and wit.

'And yet,' continued the doctor, with the most comical look, 'I have known all the wits, from Mrs. Montagu down to Bet Flint!'

'Bet Flint!' cried Mrs. Thrale, 'pray who is she?'

'Oh, a fine character, madam! She was habitually a slut and a drunkard, and occasionally a thief and a harlot.'

'And, for heaven's sake, how came you to know her?'

'Why, madam, she figured in the literary world, too! Bet Flint wrote her own life, and called herself Cassandra, and it was in verse; it began:—

When Nature first ordained my birth,  
A diminutive I was born on earth:  
And then I came from a dark abode,  
Into a gay and gaudy world.

So Bet brought me her verses to correct; but I gave her half-a-crown, and she liked it as well. Bet had a fine spirit; she advertised for a husband, but she had no success, for she told me no man aspired to her! Then she hired very handsome lodgings and a footboy; and she got a harpsichord, but Bet could not play; however, she put herself in fine attitudes, and drummed.'

Then he gave an account of another of these geniuses, who called herself by some fine name, I have forgotten what.

'She had not quite the same stock of virtue,' continued he, 'nor the same stock of honesty as Bet Flint; but I suppose she envied her accomplishments, for she was so little moved by the power of harmony, that while Bet Flint thought she was drumming very divinely, the other jade had her indicted for a nuisance!'

'And pray what became of her, sir?'

'Why, madam, she stole a quilt from the man of the house, and he had her taken up: but Bet Flint had a spirit not to be subdued; so when she found herself



obliged to go to jail, she ordered a sedan-chair, and bid her footboy walk before her. However, the boy proved refractory, for he was ashamed, though his mistress was not.

'And did she ever get out of jail again, sir?'

'Yes, madam; when she came to her trial, the judge acquitted her. "So now," she said to me, "the quilt is my own, and now I'll make a petticoat of it." Oh, I loved Bet Flint!'

Oh, how we all laughed! Then he gave an account of another lady, who called herself Laurinda, and who also wrote verses and stole furniture; but he had not the same affection for her, he said, though she too 'was a lady who had high notions of honour'.

Then followed the history of another, who called herself Hortensia, and who walked up and down the park repeating a book of Virgil.

'But,' said he, 'though I know her story, I never had the good fortune to see her.'

After this he gave us an account of the famous Mrs. Pinkethman. 'And she,' he said, 'told me she owed all her misfortunes to her wit; for she was so unhappy as to marry a man who thought himself also a wit, though I believe she gave him not implicit credit for it, but it occasioned much contradiction and ill-will.'

'Bless me, sir!' cried Mrs. Thrale, 'how can all these vagabonds contrive to get at *you*, of all people?'

'O the dear creatures!' cried he, laughing heartily, 'I can't but be glad to see them!'

'Why, I wonder, sir, you never went to see Mrs. Rudd<sup>1</sup> among the rest?'

'Why, madam, I believe I should,' said he, 'if it was not for the newspapers; but I am prevented many frolics that I should like very well, since I am become such a theme for the papers.'

Now would you ever have imagined this? Bet Flint, it seems, once took Kitty Fisher to see him, but to his

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Rudd was a lady 'universally celebrated for extraordinary address and insinuation'. She was tried for forgery with the brothers Perreau; they were hanged, and she was acquitted. Boswell then sought out her acquaintance.

no little regret he was not at home. 'And Mrs. Williams,' he added, 'did not love Bet Flint, but Bet Flint made herself very easy about that.'

We owe a great debt to Miss Burney for preserving these memoirs of the poetesses. They bring us back from the first man of letters of the day to that Johnson who sheltered 'whole nests of people in his house'; who, when he was asked by a lady why he so constantly gave money to beggars, replied, with great feeling, 'Madam, to enable them to beg on'; and who, when he found children asleep at night on bulks in the street, would put a penny in their hands, so that they might be able to get a breakfast in the morning.

His delight in human creatures gave zest to his biographical labours, and his long familiarity with the rudiments of life gave sanity and charity to his judgments. Some of the good qualities which he found in his friend Savage were also in himself, and were perhaps no small part of the bond between them. 'Compassion,' he says, 'was indeed the distinguishing quality of Savage; he never appeared inclined to take advantage of weakness, to attack the defenceless, or to press upon the falling: whoever was distressed was certain at least of his good wishes; and when he could give no assistance to extricate them from misfortunes, he endeavoured to soothe them by sympathy and tenderness.' Intellectual curiosity must have been as strong a tie. When Savage conversed with those who were conspicuous at that time, 'he watched their looser moments,' says his biographer, 'and examined their domestick behaviour with that acuteness which nature had given him, and which the uncommon variety of his life had contributed to increase, and that inquisitiveness which

must always be produced in a vigorous mind by an absolute freedom from all pressing or domestick engagements.'

This *Life of Savage* stands alone among the Lives. It was written some five-and-thirty years before the others, and was based largely on personal acquaintance. Johnson's prose had not yet run clear when he wrote it, yet for delicacy and power it is one of the few great Lives in English. It is an apology for the poetic temperament—the truest and most humane apology that has ever been written or conceived. A French critic says that it is the best possible lesson on the danger of having to do with poets—on their utter lack of principle and morals. 'If the author,' he goes on, 'had intended to satirize his hero, the work would have been delicious; unfortunately, it is written in good faith.' Johnson is so faithful in his record, and so generous in his verdict, that the breadth of his treatment bewilders a smaller mind. His understanding of ordinary human situations is well exemplified in his account of the relations of Savage with Steele. Savage was warmly befriended by Steele, who told him, in language very characteristic, that 'the inhumanity of his mother had given him a right to find every good man his father'. Steele even proposed to settle him in life by marrying him to a natural daughter, on whom, when he could find the money, he intended to bestow a thousand pounds. In the meantime Savage was much at his house, and, it seems, was unable to forbear some ridicule of his amiable foibles. This, by the diligence of friends, was brought to Steele's notice, and he banished Savage from his house. On these facts Johnson comments in a passage extraordinary for its temperance and justice: 'It is not indeed unlikely that

Savage might by his imprudence expose himself to the malice of a tale-bearer ; for his patron had many follies, which, as his discernment easily discovered, his imagination might sometimes incite him to mention too ludicrously. A little knowledge of the world is sufficient to discover that such weakness is very common, and that there are few who do not sometimes, in the wantonness of thoughtless mirth or the heat of transient resentment, speak of their friends and benefactors with levity and contempt, though in their cooler moments they want neither sense of their kindness nor reverence for their virtue. The fault therefore of Mr. Savage was rather negligence than ingratitude ; but Sir Richard must likewise be acquitted of severity, for who is there that can patiently bear contempt from one whom he has relieved and supported, whose establishment he has laboured, and whose interest he has promoted ?'

The greatness of Johnson is seen in the generosity of his temper. An intellect may be strong and active ; it is only a temper that is great. He is sometimes severe, but his severity has this rare quality, that it is void of bitterness. He seems to be almost a stranger to those little movements of personal resentment and personal pride which so often disturb judgement. Hence the lesson that he draws from the story of Savage is spoken, as it were, with the voice of the recording angel : ' The reigning error of his life was, that he mistook the love for the practice of virtue, and was indeed not so much a good man as the friend of goodness.' From almost any other writer, these words would have a flavour of satire ; the purity of Johnson's mind enables him to utter them as mere truth.

In this and the preceding papers I have attempted to

estimate the character of Johnson, as he may be seen in his works and in the records of his life. The material for such an estimate is plentiful, and is so easily accessible, than any man, with a little trouble, may have it all on a couple of shelves. Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, moreover, is generally admitted to be the best biography ever written. There is no room, it may be held, and no need, for any more talk about Johnson.

The argument might be good if it were proposed to leave the original authorities in sole possession, and to gain a knowledge of Johnson by reading his works and the works of his biographers. But this plan has not been much followed. For every reader of Johnson's works, there have been perhaps fifty readers of Boswell's *Life*, and a hundred of Macaulay's *Essays*. The cheapest estimate and the most garish portrait of Johnson have captured the popular imagination. The consequence is that he is commonly looked at somewhat quizzically, as an eccentric, or a 'character'. Small physical peculiarities, such as may be observed in most men, have swollen, and half filled the picture. These peculiarities are what rivet the attention of children, who, if a man has a wart, cannot see the man for the wart. The peculiarities of Johnson, it is true, are conspicuous; his portrait has been powerfully drawn, and they stand in bold relief; but other men have no fewer, as any man may learn who will consult, not the faded records of other lives, but his knowledge of himself. We can know Johnson better perhaps than any other of our great men; it seems a strange piece of irony that we should make of our unrivalled opportunities a bar to intimacy. His sayings are rightly praised for their humour and quaintness, yet, oftener than the sayings of



other men, they are merely true. Why, in the pageant of life, should we insist on casting Truth for a comic part?

Boswell, no doubt, is responsible for keeping Johnson a little at a distance. We are still under the spell of his hero-worship; and heroes are people whom we look at, but do not confide in. Yet if Boswell's advice had weighed with us, we should all be reading *The Rambler* to-day. We have taken delight in Boswell's pictures, and have paid too little attention to his text.

Johnson has a large following of enthusiastic admirers who would indignantly repudiate any slur cast upon their devotion. Yet some of them perhaps are worshippers rather than lovers, and lovers rather than friends. At any rate, they do not read his works.

No man—not even Boswell—can claim sole possession of Johnson. He dominated his biographers in life, and, if they were to perish, he would still live. He was always the centre of his circle: where he was, there was society. The mists and miasma of the earlier nineteenth century have partly hidden him from us. The mists will clear away, and he will come by his own.

In the meantime those who love his works enjoy no vulgar pleasure. For some years after his death, his writings were held in huge esteem, and shaped the prose of England. That time has passed. New models have captured the public ear; and at this day Johnson's noble prose is perhaps studied chiefly by his parodists. Most men who attain to literary immortality depend on their works; the works are still admired, when the man is dead. Johnson has experienced another fate; the man still has disciples, though his works are

generally believed to be dead. A hearty admirer of Johnson will not hesitate to express complete indifference to his writings. They have their admitted place among English classics, but a love for them is not a mark of literary orthodoxy. One consequence of this is not to be despised: there is no sham admiration for them. When a man professes a liking for Johnson's prose, he has found it out for himself, and his talk is good to hear.

Some writers enjoy a steady increase of reputation; their fame grows by slow deposit, or is raised by forces not intermittent in their action. The fame of Shakespeare and of Milton is of this kind. Others are subject to violent fluctuations of esteem; they have been so much a part of their age, and are so entangled in its ideas, that what is permanent in them suffers, for a time, with what is local and accidental; a later generation rises against them and disowns them. This was the fate of Dante, of Ronsard, of Donne, and of Johnson. They were all monarchs in their day; and the human mind, out of mere self-respect, deposed them. But virtue does not grow old; and sooner or later they return, to claim, as chiefs of the republic of letters, a power more surely grounded on the consent of mankind.

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